University of Alberta

The Funeral

by

Sheree Ann Frappied

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled *The Funeral* submitted by Sheree Frappied in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts.

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In Memory of Doris Davis

1909—2001

and

For Ruth

Abstract

The following is a work of autobiographical fiction. It tells the story of a young woman and her sister who, when they are in their twenties, return to their childhood home on the occasion of their estranged father's funeral. Despite the narrator's long absence, she finds herself in a profoundly familiar place, and over the course of two days, she recollects impressions and experiences almost as though she were once again a young child. For the most part, the narrator and the townspeople are depicted as ones for whom relationships inevitably waver between certainty and ambivalence.

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Chapter I

When we finally reached our childhood home, it was past midnight on the morning of our father's funeral. Before we'd set out on the journey, a five-hour flight and two-hour drive, I'd spoken long distance with the hotel owner, who'd told me we would be the only guests when we arrived. Since the doors would be locked, he'd leave two keys, one to the door on Main Street and one to our room, with our father's brother, Henry, someone he'd known forever the way most people knew each other forever there. Running a business, he said, meant locking up nights, something neither he nor anyone in town had to do to their homes, day or night, *thank God*. He said he would have the chambermaid—who stayed overnight when she also tended bar—get a room ready for us. There was a long pause after I thanked him in an embarrassed kind of way and then he said, "Things here aren't like the way I hear they are in the city. We look out for each other. Myself and plenty others, *plenty* others, liked your father awful well. Don't you forget it."

Because we'd come so late and both Henry and his wife Denise had to be up early for work, Henry had left the keys under a huge, blossoming rose bush to the left of the stairs leading to the front veranda. After a brief argument over who would brave the thorns, I fished them out and then we parked our rental car in the alley. We stepped out and looked up past the three-story building, the tallest in town, at the expanse of sky. It was beautiful, and so different from our city's night sky, which my friend, an artist whose main activity was keeping track of what light was up to, once called the color of the twentieth century, jaundiced and pink. This sky was blue-black, a hue not unlike that of gun metal, and it was unaffected by the weak flickering of the horizontal, oval-shaped lanterns on tar-streaked, wooden telephone poles that lined Main Street.

As a kid I used to stare at these same lanterns from my bedroom window in summer, when the heat and humidity kept me awake. And in winter, too, when I had sleeping troubles.

The lanterns, slim ovals on the ends of curved, gray-steel arches hanging into the street, were attached to poles just beneath the cross pieces that make telephone poles distinguishable from all other kinds of poles. At that time, the overall shape reminded me of the stained-glass crucifixion I spent most church services studying. It was one of the many depictions of biblical scenes in glass that ran the lengths of St. George's Anglican. In a funny way, the lanterns on Main Street and the Savior's head reminded me of each other. Except that the light all around His head was not accompanied by humming or buzzing as the lanterns were, and it dimmed and brightened not because of electrical activity but because one of God's many miraculous feats was moving clouds past the sun. In those days, I imagined the lanterns strained against the steel and poles in just the way I wished Jesus had strained against that cross. I expected they would one day break free and rise up to Heaven where God, the one who made all arrangements regarding the comings and goings of light, would collect them in a celestial basket, gold and silver and encrusted with jewels probably, and save them for some very religious purpose. Maybe pass them on to the Easter Bunny whose kingdom, I believed, was not far from Heaven. However, it was clear to me that Jesus, with his drooping head, wasn't going anywhere. That he'd just have to stay put, a sorry sight forever.

When we entered our room, I noticed the chambermaid and sometime bartender had done her job and maybe more. She'd turned down the green-plaid covers on the twin beds and had left a night light on. It was a mushroom-shaped, smoked-glass lamp that sat on the stand between the beds. Illuminated beneath it, in the dark, sparsely furnished room, in the otherwise dark hotel, was *The Record*, the townships' regional weekly, and a small alarm clock, the kind that can be snapped down into a flat, Naugahyde patty. The headliner read, *Drifter killed in hit and run on Ayer's Cliff road.*

My sister vanished into the hallway, off to the only bathroom on that floor, and I skimmed the article, suitcase still in hand. When it sounded as though she was about to appear, the hallway floorboards creaking louder and louder, I dropped the paper and kicked it under a

bed. If she saw me with it she would suspect something by the look on my face and then she'd get her way with me, as always, being the older and bossier one, and I'd have to tell. But she was tired, too tired to notice what I was doing, and frantic, I could see, rummaging through her carrying case. After psoriasis cream, as it turned out. Nerves always made her psoriasis worse.

I didn't blame the chambermaid—whoever she was—for what she'd done. But I did wonder what she was thinking when she placed the newspaper where she did. She must have known that the man, *who had died from injuries resulting from a single impact*, as *The Record* reported, was no drifter. She must have known that he was one of their own, a third-generation hometown boy, a man who'd attempted to repair a teen marriage gone bad by moving out west with his two growing girls and his in-laws. And that he returned to Ayer's Cliff by himself a few years after, where he lived his last solitary years, all ten of them, right there in the hotel. Her place of work. The Cliff House. She must have known, too, that my sister and I, scheduled to arrive that night—rare guests at the only hotel in town—were his daughters. And she would likely have known, along with all the rest, that one of us was a teacher and the other a nurse.

I was planning to tell my sister the truth about our father's death after breakfast and before the viewing. She didn't know all Henry had told me on the phone the last few days. We had both believed our father was ailing from what he himself had let us know was a serious illness. When he spoke to me about his death, when he said, "No hospitals, there are better ways—I have my father's gun," I suspected that the end could come sooner than nature would have it. This much knowledge, mine a little different from my sister's (he didn't mention the gun to her), is what we'd gathered from the last time we spoke to him, in separate calls, about three months earlier.

When Henry called me with the news of his death, I asked him to let me tell my sister about it in good time, and when I went to her house and lied, told her Henry had found him dead in his room, looking just like he was sleeping in his bed, peaceful, like he hadn't suffered at all, she turned away and sunk into her cushionless kitchen chair, the straight and formless top of her

nurse's uniform folding in a sharp, horizontal crease across her middle, like a careless incision. *I guess that's it then,* is all she said.

He was crossing the road at night and was hit by a car. A case of hit and run. He died at the scene, Henry said, on the bridge at Angel's Falls. On the outskirts of Ayer's Cliff. The morning following the incident Henry had gone to the reporter, a woman he'd dated in high school, and asked her to do him a favor by making a few changes in the reporting of the incident. This was the extent of what I knew about the death before we arrived at The Cliff House that night.

When I turned out the light, I thought about the few details I'd just read. They seemed an odd mix of fact and invention. In black and white it said our father was a *drifter* who *had been renting a room at the hotel for the past few weeks*, and *was not known to most in the small village*. Staring up into the darkness, I thought, A drifter . . . sounds like someone you hear about on the late news. A stranger. One of those shiftless characters my grandmother always warned about. The article stated that, according to a witness, he was struck and killed while *lying or crouched down on the side of the road* and finished with, *What he was doing on the road in the first place is a mystery*.

Struck and killed while lying or crouched down? Henry had said he was crossing the road. In any case, I wondered how Henry could think that the people of Ayer's Cliff wouldn't figure out in a matter of days, or even hours, who'd really been struck. He couldn't possibly have believed the doctored report would fool anyone. No, his decision to talk to the reporter must have been motivated by his need to fix things up a little. Not only for himself, but also for us and for everyone else in town who'd known our father. And that would be just about everyone. Henry would say that, like their mother, he'd died of cancer. That way, people at the funeral could say, *Happens to the best of us. A crying shame.* When I recall the funeral, now twenty years past, I remember such things were said. And I remember, too, that not a single person present cried. Not even the ones who said his passing was a crying shame.

I must not have blinked for a long time because my eyes stung when I closed them. Before I finally slipped off, and shortly before I would be startled to consciousness, the last thing I remember thinking was how nice, how awfully nice—how improbable—but how wonderfully *nice* it would be if, in placing *The Record* where she had, the chambermaid and sometime bartender intended to send us a message. One devised, I imagined, to let us know that while there was nothing as alluring as a mystery surrounding our father's death, still, there was more. More, even, than what was already by others commonly, though not openly, held. It must have been then, as I lay with my eyes closed, thinking about my last conversation with my father, listening to familiar sounds—my sister's sleeping, the buzzing of street lamps whose ineffectual light was shut out by venetians—when, half-asleep, I decided that during our short stay, I would do a little asking around about the night our father's body was found on the bridge at Angel's Falls.

Later that night, though how much later I'm still not certain, I was awakened by a sound, a bang, I thought. Possibly a door slamming somewhere inside the hotel. All I knew was that a loud noise woke me out of a deep sleep, and I wondered, momentarily, if it belonged to a dream I'd instantly forgotten. I sat up in bed, straight as a stick, listening, thinking perhaps it had been the radiator. A silence ensued for what seemed like a long while—two, maybe three minutes—before I heard crying. At first I thought *it* was the radiator, this time whining, as radiators do. But no, a woman was crying. Hers was not *I'm in danger and need help* crying, or, raw with anger crying, or, *I'm at the end of my wits* crying; it was more like *I'm giving-in* or *I'm giving-out* or *I'm giving-up* crying. This last being the worst kind of all as far as I was concerned. Though crying was something I had stopped doing more than a decade earlier, I had learned something about the phonics of emotion, learned to decipher what feelings might lie behind strange babblings, alarming vocal spasms, and animal-like emanations of all sorts in others. If I had any talent at all, it was in that kind of interpretation.

This crying woman sounded like someone who believed there was no one, anywhere, not

anywhere, to hear her, not even God, and that was going to have to be okay because the simple truth of the matter was that there was nothing and no one to bring her comfort. There wasn't even any such thing as comfort. And especially not in tears. *No sense in crying*, my grandmother always used to say. *None whatsoever.*

I lay down again, uneasily, still listening, my hands resting high on my breastbone, my fingers tightly interlocked. I tried to relax. It wasn't that the hotel itself was creepy, exactly, but it did feel like the kind of place it was, a place in which rooms were made use of more like they would be in a rooming house than in a hotel. Like in my father's case. All sorts of things must have taken place in it by then, over the century it had stood. In a sense, the nearly empty building seemed to me as though it was filled with people. Or at least their ghosts. He had lived in it for ten years. My father. I wondered which room. The thought of it made me aware of my feet. They'd turned cold and despite wrapping them in an extra blanket, they wouldn't get warm.

I thought of her as someone more or less my age, though I'm not sure why. And someone with boyfriend troubles. Like me. I had a boyfriend, but I couldn't really settle on him very well. He wasn't someone you could be close to, affectionate with. And he wanted me to get rid of my artist friend. I didn't want to do that. Perhaps this woman's boyfriend wanted her to do something she didn't want to do. He'd slammed the door and stormed off. That would explain the bang, if indeed there'd been one. Or maybe she'd thrown him out and slammed the door behind him. Or she'd closed it quietly behind him and he pounded on it, from the outside, with his fist, or fists, or some object, and then left, or didn't leave, and she let him back in. Her futility, in that scenario, would be caused by the many, many pointless altercations that never changed anything and never ended. Or, maybe not. Perhaps he was her best friend and best love and they had been happy for years and this was their first fight, a skirmish only, easily remedied. That would be nicer, and great, so great—but hardly probable. More likely, she'd discovered he cheated on her, had irrefutable proof, and he kept denying. Guys do that. Mine did. But then, I thought, it may have nothing to do with betrayal. It was possible that she just wished he loved her

for herself and she loved him for himself instead of what it was they had. A thing together. A relationship that satisfied needs, needs impossible to pinpoint. A comfortable emotional conflagration not to be taken for love or romance.

Then again, maybe there was no man at all. The bang may never have occurred. Or it did and was caused by a self-help book, a popular psychology thing she'd flung across the room, fed up with its simple message, repeated over and over again, stupid advice on how she should learn to love herself. How can you love yourself when no one else does? How can some shrink in some far-off city possibly know what it is like to finish only grade school and find yourself stuck in Ayer's Cliff at twenty-three? Unmarried, or unhappily married. A bartender and chambermaid at The Cliff House. Making just enough to get the odd blouse or jeans on sale at the five-and-dime in Magog. Groceries, beer, smokes. Always short of cash. *Young girls nowadays ought to get out of Ayer's Cliff,* my grandmother told us before we left for good, *there's no future here, none whatsoever, most of 'em end up with men who are no good at all.*

I thought I'd never get back to sleep under the circumstances. The distressed woman, the viewing, the business about the gun. The smell of tobacco and beer. Stale air relieved only marginally by the smell of maple wood.

I thought about the times when I cried in the night—before I gave it up. It started when I was seven, just after my sister and I returned from a trip across the border, into the U.S., where we stayed with our real parents for the first time. At that time, we lived just next door above what was then our grandparents' grocery store. The hotel and what used to be their building are to this day separated by a narrow, gravel alley. The one in which our rental car was parked.

I slipped out of bed, glad the maple floorboards felt warm on the bottoms of my feet, and sat on my knees in front of the tall window across from the foot of my bed. It overlooked Main Street. I raised the grimy venetians, slowly, to avoid the racket that would surely have bothered my sister, and tried to open the window. It was painted shut. I looked out. This was almost the same view I'd so often examined on those nights when my grandmother would walk me back to

my room after I'd stood and cried at her side of my grandparents' bed, my Negro-girl doll with me, her head clamped, vice-like, in my armpit. She would tell me that everything was all right and that if I couldn't go to sleep I should breathe all that nice, fresh air coming in through my open window. *It's the best thing, fresh air, for whatever ails you.* Then she would go back to bed, and I would dig my fingernails into my doll's tight, synthetic curls and swing her legs, hollow and bowed, the only limbs she had, against the wall, as I stood on the bed looking out my window. And the air was good, I suppose, but it was the view, the view, I think, and not really the air, that soothed my hot cheeks and made me feel that no matter what, I'd get through whatever it was that had to be gotten through. Whatever was coming up. I had no doubt of it. None whatsoever.

All of that seemed not so long ago as I listened, exhausted but not sleepy, to the crying woman, trying to see past the streetlights, wondering if Battry's Hardware was still there, just across the street, as it had been when we left fifteen years earlier. Straining to see if Charlie Battry's entry still looked the same.

I thought the crying woman must be the bartender, the chambermaid, the one who might have purposely left the paper, and I considered going out to the hall in search of her room. I imagined myself following her sounds and knocking on her door and telling her she'd feel better if only she'd just get some air, and, as a matter of fact, I needed some myself, and everything would be all right. And maybe she should get a cat. They always love you. And they really know how to live, finding safe, warm and cozy places instinctively, sleeping eighteen hours a day. I often wondered how I'd get by without my cat Winnie and my sister Grace. Maybe this woman had no cat and no sister either. How terrible, no sister. But I realized that I was thinking wrong. It was the kind of thinking you come up with in the middle of the night when you're feeling a bit disconnected from others, and yourself, and everything. Vague, too. Vague and disconnected. And you somehow think that it's okay to intrude on a stranger's privacy.

I didn't go looking for her. Instead I squinted hard into the dark beyond the street lamp,

which was very near the hotel window. I was suddenly reminded of something my artist friend once showed me, when we first became friends at fourteen.

We'd been sitting side by side on the concrete curb in front of his parents' house since sunset. He stretched one arm out and up, and he pointed with his long, bony index finger, which like all the others reminded me of exposed tree roots, to an ash that stood about as high as the street lamp beside it. Its branches and leaves were lit against the black night sky.

"See those leaves?" he asked.

"I do," I answered.

"When you look at them on a windless night like tonight, do you see only leaves, or do you see each individual leaf and how it occupies its own space?"

I couldn't tell what he was getting at. But what I could tell was that to him, the idea of leaves and spaces was a serious one. He turned to me then, eyes smiling, waiting for a response. I shivered a little, it was chilly. Removing his red-and-black-checked flannel jacket, my friend raised one eyebrow, and, on the subject of leaves and spaces, said rather mysteriously, "Everyone talks about how no two leaves are alike, the same way they talk about how no two snowflakes are alike. But no one talks about how no two leaves occupy the same space and about how no two leaves are tilted or tipped or twisted or arched or bent in *exactly* the same way." He placed the jacket across my back and shoulders. "Keep looking. And tell me what you think."

"Thanks," I said, shaking myself out of the silence I fell into every time he did something nice for me. "So what do you think," I began as I sat on my hands, wanting to get them warm, "what do you think will happen if people keep *not* noticing this kind of thing?" He laughed his laugh. High-pitched, maniacal, almost. I pulled my hands out from under me. "I'm serious," I said, as I cupped them over my mouth and blew into the hollow space between them. "What difference would it make if they did notice?" He dropped his head back, his Adam's apple resembling a mountain peak viewed from far off, and stared straight up at the sky.

"Let's just say," he began dramatically, as he always did when he was about to say

something that struck him as meaningful just before he dismissed it as most probably meaningless, "that if we don't learn to use our eyes well, we'll just keep creating monsters--mostly out of ourselves. Think about what happens to Dr. Frankenstein." Then he took my hands in his and pressed one on either side of his neck.

"I'm always burning," he said. "This feels good."

The street lamp brightened and darkened at irregular intervals, and I couldn't make out what was beyond it. Couldn't see if Charlie's entrance was still there. Years ago, we kids in town were fascinated and horrified by it, by him—by the thought of him—because according to many, and my grandmother especially, he was a dangerous man. The most dangerous in town. *As bad as they come*. Others said Charlie wasn't even there and never had been. Some said he had been, but then, for some undiscoverable reason, had left and was gone forever. That night, on my knees, looking out from the hotel, I wanted to see the entry. It wasn't just the light that hindered me. The angle wasn't quite right either. If I'd been in my old bedroom, I'd have had better luck. Much better luck. Like I did way back, when one very late night I actually saw that Charlie's door was open. God lent a hand that night, I believed, and put the electricity out.

I could no longer stay awake. I tried the window again, thinking no one would have the heart to actually paint one shut. I still couldn't open it. I shifted to the end of the bed and got onto my feet. From where I stood, the furniture in the room appeared small. The beds, nightstand, dresser, all seemed low to the floor and far away. Like miniatures designed for a doll's house. I grabbed my bedspread with both hands and lifted it, deftly and silently, the way a magician lifts his satin kerchief. I wrapped myself in it, and, leaving enough extra folds near my shoulders to fashion a crude pillow, I lay on the floor beneath the window, my back pressed against the wall. It was warm, the floor, and no harder than the bed. The next day would not be easy. I knew it would be hard to avoid thinking about how, after I'd talked to my father for the last time, I'd called Henry and asked him to get the gun.

I think the woman stopped crying just then and I fell asleep.

Chapter II

By the time I turned seven and my sister turned eight, the summer we stayed with our real parents for the first time, we had no reason to believe that we wouldn't spend our whole lives with our grandparents in the apartment above the store on Main Street. Our parents had broken up the day I was born. When I got older my grandmother told me it was because my father never showed up at the hospital and for that insult my mother decided she wasn't going home. A week after my birth, my mother left my eleven-month-old sister Grace and me with our grandparents and went off to work in the big city. And our father spent the ensuing six years of their separation here and there and everywhere. My grandmother said that this made him a good-for-nothing who'd just as soon run off somewhere as look at you. And to a different country altogether she hoped but bet not. *No such luck*, she always said. About two years before my father died, my grandmother told me that, although she had known and liked his parents her whole life, and they'd had plenty of fun running with the same crowd when they were growing up, going to dances at Angel's Falls, she never could stand my father. She said he was and always had been a bad egg, plain and simple. This she had absolute proof of because when he was their paper boy he couldn't even leave the paper on the doorstep without teasing the dog if he thought he could get away with it. Trying to make Pepper ugly just for the fun of it, she said.

Because my mother and father were born and raised in Ayer's Cliff, people often inquired about their well-being and whereabouts. Mostly in the store or on the street or in the beauty parlour, where my grandmother got her hair done weekly. I didn't pay much attention but my sister did. I guess those eleven months with them somehow *took* with her. She would often say she saw our father walking on the other side of Main street, or sitting in the stands at the ball park beside the fairgrounds. She'd swear she'd seen him and tell me that she'd yelled out and

waved her arms and jumped up and down but that he'd just kept walking, if he was walking, or he'd looked the other way, if he was watching the ball game. I didn't really believe her because I was never with her on any such occasions and because my grandmother would brush it off and tell her she must be imagining things. Anyway, I had no idea what our father looked like and no interest in the matter. None whatsoever. But I did feel kind of sorry for my sister when she went on about him. Still, I never dwelled on it for long because I was always occupied. What with my grandmother's baking and laundry and floor waxing and all her other housekeeping goings-on that sometimes required my help, and school, and church with Sunday School, and the store (where I sometimes got to be delivery girl), and more pressing unknowns to sort out, I was pretty busy.

The store faced east, so every morning my grandfather worked a rusty contraption that unrolled a dark green awning with beige block letters, their paint cracked and peeled, that read *Hartson's Grocery.* On holidays I helped him with this, and with other small jobs. Jobs that didn't entail going down cellar. Like all cellars in the county, ours had rats. *The worst vermin of all*, my grandmother always said. But luckily we had Rudy living in the store. He was an alley cat with thin and tall but partial ears. Apparently great battles had claimed chunks of them. If you were to trace around them on paper, something I'd tried but failed to do many times, the image would come out looking like an oak leaf, one more ragged, even, than normal. We called him Old Rude. My grandmother didn't mind my playing around with him as long as I always remembered to wash my hands after. She had an idea that he was filthy and had fathered every single cat in Ayer's Cliff *and beyond, probably*, she'd laugh. He was what she called *a real lookin' thing*. My grandfather always said he wasn't anything to fuss over, not an animal you could love, but he often reminded me that Rudy was real special anyway because, unlike all other cats, he feared no damn rat no matter what the size. I could never have explained it then, but I have come to realize that in those years, my fascination with Old Rude was all about my faith in his power to act as my personal protector. At the time, it was a faith I needed because the considerable one I'd

previously held in Jesus himself had waned. I knew He was supposed to be a rescuer of lambs and children, but noticing how sad and peaked he looked, I decided I needed someone a little hardier than that. Someone not so caved in. And Rudy was not only strong but he had just me to look after.

Many of our customers were villagers who lived on residential streets in town. But the store also got business from the dairy farmers and the rich Americans who owned places on the lake that looked to me like haunted houses. Most of them were sons and daughters of my great-grandfather's customers. My grandfather ran the store for thirty years before I came along, and his father had run it thirty years before that. My grandmother always used to say that when you run a store on Main Street you learn awful quick that nothing in town ever changes, but my grandfather always used to say that every single day you find out something new.

The only big change in business on Main Street that I can remember happened when I was six. Irwin Unger opened an IGA across the street. And that meant that I helped count less cash from the big silver cash register and that the old shoe box beside it, labeled *outstanding accounts*, held fewer dog-eared papers. It meant that my grandfather had more time to play grease-pen X-s and O-s with me, and more than the usual amount of time for listening to customers who spoke either in bursts or, if the talk was on certain subjects, in murmurs. It also meant that the pantry in our upstairs apartment got turned into a sewing room for my grandmother's piecework.

It was after lunch on a hot, close day that summer I turned seven when my grandmother said, "You ought to go on outside. It's too hot to spend the afternoon indoors." I wanted to go, but I wanted to go barefoot. My grandmother had already said *no*. She didn't stop the machine to look at me or place a hand gently on my hair the way she normally did when I rubbed my cheek against her shoulder. Instead, she remained intent on the glove she sewed. The tiny bulb brightened her fingers and warmed them too, I imagined. They were slim and nimble fingers

pressing and pushing the raw cotton into various positions. On a low shelf at her side there was a box labeled *Tapatco*: it was half-filled with undyed cotton cut-outs—multiple identical forms of the left hand. Beside that box was a smaller one filled with tall, cone-shaped spools of industrial thread.

"Don't hinder me now," my grandmother warned. "I want to finish a certain number before my story comes on, before suppertime." She meant *As the World Turns*. "I won't have you out getting kidney infection, which anybody knows you can get from the ground any time of year."

I tried to get her to soften by resting my head on her shoulder as she finished her work on what would eventually become, in some other person's sewing room, a complete garden glove. I watched how the teeth, centered beneath the plate on either side of the needle, moved the seam in one direction and how, when my grandmother pushed the reverse button, they moved it in the opposite direction. "Are your fingers sore?" I asked. The tips of her thumbs and first three fingers on both hands looked dry—split open, and pale.

"Nothing serious. Don't you worry about me," she said. She cut the thread and carefully placed the cotton hand on top of a stack of others to her right. Without moving her lips she counted from the top down and then turned to me. "Thirty-three," she said, " . . . done thirty-three just this hour. Not much longer now before I'm finished." She patted my cheek but didn't smile as she usually would, and she took my shoulders and gently pushed them back. We were the same height when she sat on her sewing stool. "Stand straight now. Don't ruin your chances for good posture." She brushed the end of my nose, lightly, with the tip of her little finger. "Piecework's not only for paying bills," she said, "it's also for saving up in case people have to go traveling, or visiting."

"C'mon, please?" This was one more plea for bare feet, one I knew would be useless. My grandmother never changed her mind once kidneys came anywhere near the conversation. She didn't respond. Instead she looked at the catalog pictures pinned to the corkboard just to the right

of the door that led from the tiny sewing room to the kitchen. Her mind was set on a blue nylon dress for me and a pink one for my sister. The kind that you wear a crinoline under. The kind of crinoline that's noisy. They had already arrived in the mail and now she was looking at pictures of pointed-toed black-patent-leather shoes with pearls on top, and the dresses. The blue nylon would be my second Sunday best, acting as a back-up should I spill anything on my green-and-white striped one.

"You've got to put something on your feet. Now, run out and play till you're called."

I moved off to find my sneakers and waited at the top of the stairs for the usual rules.

"Watch out for cars! And stay away from that Charlie Battry!"

"I will," I yelled back and ran down the stairs into the store—the only way outdoors was through the store's front door on Main Street, or through its side door in the alley—but slowed up when I heard Lysle Thompson distressing over something like he usually was when he came into the store and talked with my grandfather.

This time he was telling my grandfather his woes about the history he was writing. "I don't know, Gordon," Lysle said. "History's history, ain't it? I'm not particularly fond a puttin' in the part about Hannah Dustin, but if I don't, all the Dustins from here to Timbuktu gonna be hollerin' about it."

"Well, let's hear what you've got so far," my grandfather said.

"Can I have a marshmallow cookie?" I interrupted.

"Sure, doll. But just one . . . save room for something later."

From the bulk cookie bin I chose one that wasn't too broken up and sat on an unopened box of canned beans, pretending not to listen.

"Okay. This is what I got." Lysle put on his glasses and began reading from his leather notebook: *Jonathan Dustin, Hannah's great-grandson, left many descendants here in town and nearby. They are all descendants of Hannah Dustin, the first woman in America to have a monument erected in her memory. She was recognized as a hero for having saved many white*

settlers' lives. The deed for which she became famous was that she slaughtered several Indians who had captured women and children to take up north to collect a bounty on them. This event took place on an island in the Connecticut river near Haverhill, Massachusetts, on April 15th, 1697."

"Uh-huh . . . does *this event* mean the slaughter?" my grandfather asked.

"Let's see." Lysle pushed his glasses up and brought his notebook closer to his face.

"Yep. It does."

"I don't know, Lysle," my grandfather said. "You know this place as well as I do. The Dustins will have a fit if you leave it out. But, for cryin' out loud, haven't the Battrys had a bad enough time of it? What with Charlie's . . . *condition*. And the store just gone into receivership. Can't even afford electricity. Christ Almighty. Bad enough being the only Indians in the county."

"Ain't nobody sure of that, Gordon. Lots think the Battrys ain't Injuns at all. Think they're A-rabs."

"Either one, it's bad enough."

As soon as I caught the sound of Charlie Battry's name I got up and examined candy and gum on the display counter near the two men. "You talking about somebody having some kind of contrition?" I asked this while I pretended to study the list of ingredients on the side of a Juicy Fruit package.

"No cause to worry," my grandfather answered me, and he frowned as he looked down and scratched the back of his head. Something he did whenever he was about to change the subject. "Where you getting those big words anyway?"

"I don't know . . . crosswords . . . Sunday School."

Charlie Battry was someone all the kids at school talked about. For a long time we were scared of him just like we were supposed to be. But I had become more curious than scared. And except for Jimmy Battry, Wilbur Lore, and Katie Turner, I was in a better position than anyone else at school to watch for Charlie because he purportedly lived in the cellar beneath Battry's

Hardware, a store almost directly across from us. The IGA faced us, and a wide alley separated it from Battry's. Toward the back of that building, on the alley side, was the door to the cellar. I could see it from my bedroom window. Not the door itself, which was hard to see from any angle, being recessed and in perpetual shadows. From my room I saw only the curved lattice awning that jutted out over the entryway. When I stood directly across from the door, I could see that even the entryway was veiled by untended Virginia Creepers, that straggling vines were partly responsible for hindering anyone's view of the door. It was a tradition among the kids in town to dare one another to knock on that door, pretending to be a civilized visitor so they could get a good look at Charlie Battry. No one ever took the dare. Instead, clusters of kids would gather on the other side of the alley and throw stones at the door, chanting, *Char-lie, Char-lie, creep-y, crawl-y! Hide, hide, die inside!"* I never joined in, not because I was better than anyone, but because if I did and my grandfather heard about it or saw me doing it he'd look at me with a sad face and be quiet for a long time before he'd say, "You ought to know better." And my grandmother would say, "How many times have I told you to stay away from there?"

Apart from Katie Turner, not one of us had ever seen Charlie Battry, and I was beginning to wonder about Katie's stories. Katie claimed numerous sightings, but with the exception of one or two variations her stories were all the same. She said that lots of times, in the middle of the night, she awoke to the sound of Charlie Battry rustling around in the chestnut tree outside her bedroom window. And when she looked out, there he was, staring in with googly eyes. She said his face was all bloodied and he wore a dead fox slung over his shoulder that had its eyes plucked out and hanging down on threads. Sometimes not a fox but a coyote. Sometimes a chicken. And she said that he had foot-long curved fingernails that he used to make scary noises on her screen. When she'd scream, he'd vomit rats' heads and whoop like an Injun and run off. I was having a hard time believing that anybody could eat rats' heads that often and always said so, but the kids at school seemed to think rats' heads were probably the least of it when it came to all the vile things that old Charlie probably ate.

Katie Turner seemed a lively and happy girl. *She's like Jephthah's daughter, filled with timbrels and dances*, my grandmother used to say. She was a grade-fiver when I was only a grade-one-er. And prettier than most girls in the upper grades. She was already *commencing to be womanly*, as my grandmother put it. Her face was a freckled, laughing face, her long hair thick, wavy, auburn. She tied it back in satin ribbons—monochrome ribbons. Gray, beige, tan, white. But their lack of color was made up for by the fabric's rich sheen. Katie's teacher awarded her these hair ribbons for scoring the highest proficiency in reading in the whole class. I don't think people in Ayer's Cliff said much about her school awards, but often I overheard them talking in the store about how they thought she'd grow up to be a movie star, someone like Ann Margret. Nearly all the adults in town described people's looks in relation to TV personalities or movie stars. But us kids kept an eye on Katie mostly because she was the only kid in town who owned a horse. A miniature horse, a Palomino named Dandy.

What with going back and forth for lunch, I walked by her house four times a day on school days, often by myself because my sister usually ran and caught up with her friends. I wasn't allowed to join them. Being a year younger, I was way too embarrassing to be seen with. My grandmother always gave me sugar cubes for Dandy. But she forbade me from going into the Turner house. This rule was a hard one for me to keep to because Katie often invited me in, and because their house was so curious, the only one like it in town. It had just two rooms, the other kids said, making it different from the other houses, which were a lot like my uncle's. His was a large two-storey house with gables, shutters, and a wide veranda supported by sturdy white columns. According to him, the Turner house was prefabricated, put together with some kind of synthetic material. It had only two small aluminum windows—another oddity, aluminum windows. What was also strange was the yard. While all the other yards in our town were made up of lush green grass and sizable vegetable gardens at the side or back, the Turners' yard was mud that froze up in winter, got real soupy in spring and summer, and was cut off from its surroundings by a flimsy plywood fence. No one in Ayer's Cliff had fences—unless they were

low, cedar fences that had silvered over time—because they were generally thought of as a testament to unneighborliness. *A person who builds a fence like that don't want to give you the time of day,* my grandmother always said.

Katie had two older brothers. One I saw around a lot, the other never. He was the one who the townspeople spoke of, or rather, referred to, with silent mouthings and exaggerated facial expressions. *Larry*. Whenever I asked my grandmother about him she'd always put her hand up like that white-gloved traffic cop down in Magog and say, *Don't know a thing about it. Don't let me catch you going into that house or you'll have something to answer for.* But the other one, Danny, I saw hanging around with other teenagers in front of the bank on Main Street plenty of times, his dark hair slicked back except for one piece hanging past his nose, wearing a leather jacket with sleeves too short and standing there with an ash too long on the cigarette he held between his index and forefinger, and with his thumb hitched in his front pocket. But Larry, apparently slightly older, was a different story. I overheard others, adults in the store, say there sure was no one like Larry, and it was a good thing they practically never saw him because if they did they might have to do something about it, since he was always on the lam. Whenever I asked my grandfather what that meant, he'd say, *We don't see him, but that don't mean he's not around.*

One day after school I couldn't help myself. Katie was out in the yard feeding Dandy when she hollered to me to come and visit. It was early spring, but it hadn't rained much, so the yard wasn't mucky yet. She wanted me to come inside. Disobeying my grandmother's rule, I did.

The main room contained an old cabinet TV with tall rabbit ears attached to a channel selector with broken beige-and-painted-brass knobs on top. There were also two dark brown, corduroy chesterfields on opposite walls, and a brown and beige oval braided rug between them. Three standing ashtrays, overflowing with cigarette butts, were set about the room. To the left of the TV was a small entryway that led to a tiny pantry with a long, low sink in which was piled plates encrusted with baked beans and catsup. Down from the kitchen was a bathroom. Really it

was more like a toilet room, as there was no tub, just a small, rusted sink and toilet. The other room was a bedroom, Katie told me. I couldn't see what it was like. It was on the other side of a soiled curtain hanging inside a doorframe. I wondered where Katie's parents were and, knowing I was in the wrong and that my grandmother would be worried, I felt the urge to leave. I hesitated before saying that I had to go. Katie grabbed me by my arm with both hands.

"No. Don't go. We can have some fun, first. Let's play for a bit . . . hey, did you know that grown women bleed every month?"

"Oh, well, I . . . ," I stammered.

She pulled me in the direction of the bathroom. "C'mon," she said, "let me show you. My Mom's stuff is in the bathroom. C'mon, she's hardly ever home, she won't catch us. It's not all bad anyway, it's good, it's what tells you you're not gonna have a baby."

"Katie!" A voice came at us from the bedroom. "Take your fat ass outta here! You're not supposed to play inside!"

I looked at Katie and whispered, "Can he *see* us?"

"Nah." Her reply was casual but low and guarded. "Going," she said, and, in a flash, she froze as a small animal would if it were trying to figure its way out of a tangled underbrush, before she said his name, " . . . Danny." She clutched my arm even harder, clearly afraid. But even though she looked so scared, and even though I was scared too, I took some consolation in thinking that at least it was Danny and not Larry, the one always on the lam, who was behind that curtain.

"Come, sit here," she whispered.

We sat side by side on one of the chesterfields.

"I really, really gotta go . . . my grandmother will be so mad at me."

"You know," she said, bringing her face up closer to mine, "lots of times when kids come over, we play a game called *Dude*—you ever played it?"

"I don't know." I shook my head and shrugged my shoulders.

"Well, you just take off your bottoms and get under a blanket. My brothers—"

"Katie!"

The yelling voice again. I began to shake.

"You either get the hell outside or send your friend home!"

I pulled away from her and started for the door.

"No, please . . . please?" She came up behind me and grabbed my shoulder. "Please stay just a little longer. We can go outside and play with Dandy."

"Just for a minute, though," I said.

I was relieved at having made it outdoors, where I could pat Dandy's nose. Without turning to look at Katie, I said, "Thanks for inviting me in but I gotta go."

"Are you sure?" She cupped a hand to one corner of her mouth and whispered loudly, "The next time you come, I'll tell you—"

Suddenly, so suddenly that to this day I can't figure out just how it happened, I found Katie curled at my feet. She was squealing in a pitch so high as to be nearly soundless—mostly just air escaped her mouth and nostrils, air, at that nearly inaudible pitch. I leapt back instantly and looked up. It was as though he had appeared from nowhere, that brother. His long legs, locked at the knees, straddled her mid-section; his brow was contracted, his top lip curled. In his right hand he held a razor-thin whip, the color of blanched peanuts. Hardly able to breathe myself, I looked back down where Katie, writhing, struggled to rub her calves, and I saw a straight red line where a single stroke had bloodied both legs.

Katie raised one arm above her head, the palm of her hand facing him.

"I'm not crying . . . I'm not . . . I'm just . . . laughing," she gasped.

I looked up again at Danny, or, a person I expected to be Danny, and saw instead someone who looked almost exactly like him but taller, leaner, and not dark-haired but fair. Grinning, he turned his long torso and reached out to the horse at his side. He stroked Dandy's mane just once and let his hand drop to his side. In that moment the stillness in his body seemed

to match mine. Just before I turned and ran, he spoke to her in a quiet, even tone.

"Next time you call me Danny I'll skin you alive."

Chapter III

I was feeling on edge about going to the funeral home. It was noon and I hadn't told my sister what I knew about our father's death. And that bothered me. I was worried about myself, too, because I'd never seen a dead person before. And for some unknown reason, I'd not asked Henry about the condition of our father's body. I'd somehow forgotten to ask what would have been most logical, what shape his body was in when it was found on that dark road.

The mortician at Cass's Funeral Home, Bruce Lavours, was impeccably dressed—black suit, white collar, silver cuffs, shiny shoes—and he smelled overpoweringly of Old Spice. I'm sure he would have been horrified if he'd known that his jacket lapel had a little spot of something, dried milk or cream maybe, on it. Something he'd spilled on himself at lunch, or worse, something he'd accidentally dribbled. He treated us very nicely. Too nicely, I thought. I detected pity behind what was likely a well-rehearsed greeting.

"Please accept my sincerest condolences at the loss of your loved one," he said. "Henry has already come and gone, run off to work." He ushered Grace and me into an anteroom off the chapel. It was made private by a dark-green satin curtain with a gold fringe. He pulled the curtain closed behind us saying, "take all the time you need."

The viewing area was small and lit by a recessed, soft, glow originating from somewhere I couldn't quite pinpoint, and by short, fat, gold candles sitting inside glass globes in the middle of small tables, one at either end of the coffin. Except for a few chairs along the red-velveteen walls, and the two tables and coffin itself, the room was empty. I stood back, close to the curtain, while my sister moved immediately to the coffin. Her upper half sunk into it and she began crying quietly.

Her crying surprised me a little. I'd expected her to become emotional but not to the

extent she did. I was a little relieved by her response because I could tell from the way she cried that she hadn't seen a shocking or mangled corpse, one that she hardly recognized. Maybe I wouldn't even have to tell her about how he'd died until we got home. She'd told me on the plane that she wanted to read something at the funeral, not give a eulogy or anything, just read a poem that I might help her pick out. Perhaps withholding the facts about his death would make that easier for her, less stressful. She'd always been really affected by certain kinds of suffering.

I didn't move. I just hung back by the curtain. I was thinking about what I should do. For a minute I felt like calling for Bruce. Saying, "Excuse me, but I'd like to go to another area because, well, you know, really, he wasn't *my* loved one." But decided that would be seen as not only highly inappropriate but also very suspicious. And this was, after all, Ayer's Cliff, so a story outlining such behavior on my part would be sure to get around. I decided to remain standing where I was. In a while, after my sister calmed down, her breathing having resumed its normal rhythm, she raised herself up and turned to me. "Come over here, Annie," she said. I wasn't sure I could make my legs move. I took a few steps forward and found that they felt the way they do when you get off a roller coaster.

"I'm coming," I said. Remaining where I was, I suddenly went rummaging through my purse. "I can't find my gum." She knew I always chewed gum whenever I got nervous.

"You don't need gum. He looks pretty . . . okay. Come on." She pulled some tissue from her sweater pocket, her hands shaking a little, and used it to blow her nose. "There," she said as she shoved the used tissue into the same pocket, "I feel better now." She extended her arm and opened her hand, "Come on," she said.

My feet didn't want to move. The night before they'd been cold for hours. In that moment they were numb. I couldn't even tell I had any.

"Sure," I said. "Offer me the all-snotty hand."

We both laughed. Broke into that *we're trying to be quiet because we're not supposed to laugh* kind of laughter like we used to when we were kids up to something that either was

supposed to be serious or was something we were forbidden to do. Like the times we dressed in our grandmother's girdles and bras, finding hundreds of ways to fit and drape them on the wrong parts of our bodies. Nothing was funnier than various configurations of bra straps around the ears.

"Quit it," Grace said, "Shh! Shhh!" She tried to compose herself.

The laughter helped. It got my feet back, anyway, and I approached the coffin. I took her hand and, frozen once again, stood before our father's corpse.

My first impression was of how strange it was to look at a dead person with black hair. *Someone young has died*, were the first words that came to mind when I looked at our dead father. Without moving my head or taking my eyes off him, I asked, "How old was he again?"

"Forty-six."

"That's not very old."

"No. That's not."

I was surprised at how someone so dead could look almost alive. Except for the pleasant little closed-mouth, near-smile that was obviously pinned, or sewn, or maybe glued into place (a mouth position nothing like any I'd ever seen him make in his life), he did look pretty much the same dead as alive.

"He doesn't look dead," I said.

"No. He doesn't."

I said, "It's hard to believe he's dead."

"You're not kidding."

Our father had always looked strong and healthy. Even over his last ten years he hadn't looked much different from the time I first met him. Henry had sent us pictures, that's how we knew. Even then, when he was dead, dead as anything, we couldn't help but be reminded of the fact that our father was a handsome man.

Grace stepped back from the coffin. "He sure doesn't look like someone who's died of

cancer," she whispered. She stepped back up to it and leaned a little closer to the face. "It's unbelievable," she again whispered. "Cancer patients look worse, thinner, more emaciated." She put both hands on the side of the coffin, facing it and leaning on it heavily, and looked straight down at the floor. I knew what she was thinking.

"Doesn't that strike you as weird?" she asked me.

"Maybe it was a fast cancer and didn't, you know, affect him much. Just three months, really, wasn't it?"

She raised her head up. "What do you mean—didn't *affect* him much? *Look*, he's *dead*."

I panicked a bit and then performed a quick visual scan of our father's body. It was dim . . . I wished there was better light. But even in the semi-darkness, I was able to find a sign. Just past his right temple, about an inch or two into the hairline, I made out an odd irregularity in the hair, both in color and texture, I thought. This irregularity was rectangular-shaped, about half an inch wide and maybe five or six inches long. I squinted, some, and ascertained that the hair there was not irregular in color and texture. Rather, the oddness in that area had more to do with the hair's distribution. There, the hair looked more plentiful, thicker, or something.

"That's the thing," she said, and frowned and bit her lower lip the way she always did whenever she knew she was right but still questioned her own judgment. "It can waste you in three months, or it can take years—but it does waste you."

"True," I said, not taking my eyes off the spot, "but they say morticians can work miracles these days, they're artists, really artists, they say."

I needed a closer look. I wanted to figure out what I was looking at. Then a reasonable solution came to me. I thought that if I leaned into the coffin and kissed him on the forehead, or, better yet, the temple, I could get a good look as I moved in. I could even feel it with my fingers.

There was nothing that could have prepared me for what it feels like to touch, much less kiss, a dead body. And the fact that it belonged to someone I'd never once kissed in life, made the whole thing even more strange. It was like kissing a popsicle, a dry one. One that your lips

could stick to. But I surprised myself by remaining focused, and I managed, when I kissed the temple, to place my hand above the ear and run my fingers into the hair as if I was performing a goodbye gesture. It was then that I could feel the altered texture of the hairs at what would have been the roots, if there had been any. But instead of roots, I felt hairs, sections of them, that had been inserted into some kind of substance, putty, maybe. It was softer than other parts of the scalp and felt like it might actually move, or give, if I were to apply undue pressure there. And I was so curious that, without even thinking it through, I straightened my forefinger and index finger and pressed, somewhat, on the area. Even though I suspected some malleability there, I was surprised—the way you are when you get an unexpected little electrical shock—when the whole rectangular patch shifted slightly. It slid the way a paper cut-out does when you are carefully pressing it onto a surface with too much glue on it. Everything happened in a split second. When I first felt movement, my immediate impression was that the corpse had swiftly turned its face toward me.

"Jesusgod!" I muttered and leapt back from the coffin. Grace grabbed my arm in response to what must have looked not like a leap but like clumsy stumbling that could have landed me on the carpet. Her mouth was open as though she was about to exclaim something or other, but I cut her off and whispered, "It's not nice here, let's go."

"I'd like to kiss him goodbye too, " she said as she buried her face in her hands, "but I just can't make myself do it."

"Don't worry," I said, giving her a quick hug at the same time as I turned her away from the coffin. "Let's just go. Dead bodies don't—" I needed to catch my breath, needed to figure out how to finish the sentence I'd begun. I hurried her to the exit, toward the curtain.

"Don't what?" she stopped us in our tracks.

"Don't . . ." I pulled the curtain aside and peered out. "Where *is* that guy anyway? Let's tell him we're going."

"Don't *what*?"

"Need to be kissed," I said. "Dead bodies don't need to be kissed."

Chapter IV

When it was clear to me that my grandfather and Lysle were not about to discuss matters concerning Charlie, carrying on instead with the Dustin problem, I decided to walk down to the Turners'. I'd learned that being friendly with Katie was safe as long as I visited with her on the alley side of the fence. Ever since the whipping incident, whenever I reminded her that she said she was going to tell me something if I came again, she would just stretch her arms straight up above her head and sort of yawn. I would watch her and wait. Eventually she would say, "Guess I forgot."

Their place was a short ways from the store, just about half of the distance to school. There was no way of getting there from any direction without going down the alley, which I did by walking along the IGA wall, keeping my distance from Charlie's cellar door like I always did. Once I passed it, I glanced down the lane to my left, behind the IGA, where there was a little cul-de-sac. The two smallest houses in town were there and so was the old grain mill, the out-of-use one, just a little beyond them. Between the two houses sat a pretty tall woodpile. One of the houses was rented by Maureen Lore, who lived there with her son Wilbur, my classmate, and the other belonged to Phil Battry, the one who ran the hardware store and who all the kids thought was Charlie's brother. Phil lived there with his nephew, another of my classmates, Jimmy Battry. So Wilbur and Jimmy were next-door neighbors, and both had great visual access to Charlie's cellar entry. My grandmother said that the reason Battry's store was failing to the point that Phil couldn't even pay his electric bill was because he stayed in bed nearly all day sleeping it off. He couldn't even get his *'a' double 's' around to opening the store till noon*, and their whole family was the worse kind of mixed-up mess she'd ever seen in her life.

This day I saw Jimmy Battry sitting on top of the woodpile the same way as he usually

did. He always perched there on his haunches and ate raw onions the way most people eat apples. I admired his brown skin for a moment—mine was so white I always got blisters in the summer—before it struck me that he might think it strange of me to be standing there just staring at him. I pretty well had to say something.

"Hey there, Jimmy." I sauntered over, nearer to the woodpile.

Jimmy just looked at me, appearing not at all curious or interested as to why I might be talking to him for the first time ever. He put his hand on the top of his head and scratched like the devil. *Probably lice*, I thought.

"Hey, what."

I was surprised he answered me—he was a kid who never talked—and I tried to figure out what should come next.

"Well . . . don't it make you cry to eat onions like that?"

"Nope."

"Aren't they strong-tasting?"

"Nope."

"Somebody told me that's why your teeth are so blinding in their whiteness."

Our teacher always said, *We're going to have to get ourselves some sunglasses if we're going to be talking to you now, aren't we, Jimmy? After all, your teeth are blinding in their whiteness*. The rest of us would laugh, but Jimmy, no matter whether he was standing or sitting, would just put his hands into his pockets and stare at the floor. In school he never answered anybody back.

"Could be."

"Why don't you come down off that woodpile so I don't have to yell up at you?"

"Lookin' out for Wilbur."

"Waitin' for him?"

"Nope. Lookin' out for him."

Suddenly we heard three or four echoing thuds in quick succession. We both looked toward the sounds. Tim Blakey and Roddy Sherman, two grade three-ers, were throwing stones at Charlie Battry's door. Jimmy turned his face in the other direction, toward the mill. It was a huge, vacant building with a tall, narrow entry looming in the center of its facade.

"Anybody ever tell you about this here mill?" he asked.

"No. Not that I remember."

He pointed at the birds that were sitting along the rafters beneath the roof's highest point and then nodded in the direction of the ones strutting around the courtyard.

"It's home to these here doves."

"Oh, you mean all those pigeons?"

"Nope. I mean doves. Pigeons are a type of dove and lots of folks don't know that." He spoke without looking at me.

More thuds . . . then chanting.

"Say, Jimmy, let's say you come down off that woodpile and we give Tim and Roddy a scare."

"Wouldn't make no difference. They'd just be back." Then he turned to me. "What business is it of yours, anyways?"

Anthony and Roddy ran up street making whooping sounds. As I waited for their sounds to die out, I noticed that between his bare feet Jimmy was balancing some kind of jar.

"What you got between your feet, Jimmy?"

"What's it look like?"

"Looks like a jar or something."

"Gonna get me some fireflies come nightfall."

"You mean lightnin' bugs?"

I wanted to ask him about Charlie Battry. Maybe Charlie was his father. Brother. Cousin. Some relation.

"Hey, does Charlie Battry really live in that cellar?"

"What business is it of yours, anyways?"

"Just wanted to know."

"Charlie Battry's dead." He announced this as he arose and hiked up his sagging overalls. Jimmy was a slim but barrel-chested boy. "Dead as a damn doornail." Leaving the jar on top of the woodpile, he climbed down to my level and placed his fists on either side of his waist. He cleared his throat fiercely. "Bin gone six years now."

I took a step or two back, clearing some space in case he spit.

"How do you know that?"

"Uncle Phil told me. And he's marked right over in the graveyard. You ever bin to the graveyard?" He licked the length of his palm and ran his hand through his hair from front to back. It was so black it shone silver and his bangs were so long that with the saliva the long parts stayed stuck down at the back of his neck. I noticed for the first time that he had hazel eyes, the color of topaz.

"Sure," I lied, "lots of times."

"Well, c'mon. I'll show you."

I followed him down street, past the fairgrounds, the community hall, Beulah's United, and past the iron, filigree letters on the gate that read, *Ayer's Cliff Cemetery*. If my grandmother had known I was going to the graveyard with Jimmy Battry she'd have had the biggest fit of her life.

"This is where people rot in the ground, you know." Jimmy said this as we passed by rows of granite headstones on which the names of Lovejoy, Turner, Ayer, Langmaid, the eight other original settlers, and many other townspeople, were carved. The cemetery had a kind of main road down the middle of it.

"Everybody dies, you know. You're gonna too." Jimmy said this as he eyed the stones.

"I know that," I said.

"And when somebody dies that went the wrong way, he don't get a proper burial. They bury him on the other side of the fence."

We were coming to the back fence at the point farthest from the church. Jimmy climbed it and I followed. He squatted down seven or eight paces later and spoke with a long piece of crabgrass clenched between his teeth.

"Take a look, here." He motioned to a rectangular slab of cement half covered by thistle and chickweed.

I got down on my hands and knees and cleared the rough surface as best as I could. All I was able make out on the cracked slab were three worn initials that looked like a W, a C, and a B. Then I watched Jimmy, who had moved off a few steps, keeping his back to me as he stood watching crows gathering in the small field ahead of us.

"Wesley Charles Battry," he said, "died because he went on a dangerous mission in the big city. He was the best officer in the force, and one of the only police, ever, who was Injun. And the only one in our family, ever, who got college learnin'. He was tryin' to save a woman from a bank robber and he got shot in the head. Some folks said he shot himself, so they buried him here, on the wrong side of the fence." And with this, Jimmy walked toward the crows, his head held high and moving slowly from side to side as though he were inspecting the tranquil leaves in the treetops. He left me, still on the ground, staring at the concrete rectangle, astonished because I'd never stopped to think that it might be Charlie's *ghost* living in Battry's cellar. When I looked up I saw the murder of crows clear a path for Jimmy, one like I imagined the Lord cleared when he parted the waters for those poor slaves who were trying so hard to believe in a God who wouldn't even let them see his face. Jimmy walked straight along that path, and he didn't seem to need to look back and see the crows close the path behind him.

I got home just as my grandfather and sister were coming out of the store. They saw me running towards them.

"What were you doing down street? You monkey you."

"Nothin'. Just went to see if Dawn Travail needed help watering her roses."

"That's a girl," he said. "Why don't we walk up street and get some fries. I want to tell you girls about your holiday."

Chapter V

My grandmother tried to talk about it as though it was all somehow part of the regular rhythm of our daily lives. "You'll be going to a real nice lake resort for a holiday. And you'll be staying in a cabin right near the water. Your mother and father are running the pavilion there." Time and again, she told me about the long sleeves I would have to remember to wear so that the sun wouldn't blister my shoulders while I was on holiday, and about the new haircut that I should get so that my hair would be easier to tuck under the hat I would have to remember to wear so that I wouldn't get sunstroke. The thought that I would have to remember these things worried me. We *lived* in a lake-resort town, and Lake Massawippi was the nicest lake in the world. But I'd never even heard of a pavilion before. The advice itself, and the look in my grandmother's eyes as she gave it, led me to suspect that there was more to worry about than she was willing to own up to. My sister, though, was unconcerned. Falling down with excitement more than anything else. When I asked her if she was scared because we were going on the bus by ourselves, she just said, *All kids go on buses by themselves sooner or later, fraidy-cat.* But she didn't say a word when I told her that I bet there were plenty of kids in Ayer's Cliff that didn't know that.

The evening before our journey, my grandmother said she had a surprise for me. Leading me into my own room blindfolded by one of my dress-up scarves, she said, "Now, sit there on the bed, and no peeking." Then I heard a low scraping sound and sensed a depression in the mattress. I didn't know whether she had placed something on the bed or whether she was sitting immobile beside me.

"All right. Now you can look," she said.

I struggled to untie the blindfold that had got tangled in my hair. I blinked in the

direction of an object beside me in order to bring it into focus, and then immediately looked up at my grandmother. She seemed not to breathe as she stood in front of me. I looked at the object she'd set on the bed.

I rarely got surprises in the form of presents.

"Is this mine to borrow, or to keep?" I asked.

"Why, sure it is . . . yours to keep . . . all to yourself," said my grandmother. "So if you get homesick . . . you just collect some special lake things in this so you can show them to Grammie when you get back." I didn't look down at it. I didn't know what *homesick* meant. Instead, I kept looking at my grandmother and said, "I wish you were coming." She faltered as though she were moving in two directions at once and left the room. A few seconds later I heard the bathroom door quietly close.

Alone, I inspected the gift.

It was a traveling case—a square red one, about one foot deep, with a white handle on the top and a silver clasp on the front. The clasp bore a small silver loop through which the owner could, should she so desire, clip a padlock. The tiny padlock and its thin keys were in a plastic bag on an upper deck that was elbow-hinged to the bottom portion of the case. I figured out that when I pulled upward and outward, the deck popped toward me, and, to my delight, uncovered a lower chamber. A receptacle, it seemed to me, made just for secret treasures. The flip side of the lid had a rectangular mirror, and the inner surfaces of the case were lined with red satin that had been glued on in ripples that looked like ribbon candy.

The primary source of my fear lay in the fact that I had never met my father, and I remembered my mother vaguely. The only reason I was able to recall her at all was because, for the duration of her infrequent and brief stays, she left her bone-colored makeup kit in the bathroom, which always smelled of hair spray. I knew, too, that on the days the kit appeared, a pair of teal blue high heels did too, leaning to one side against the wall at the top of the stairs. I remembered that the person who wore them—a person who, oddly, slept all day—had blonde

hair that looked as though it might feel like cotton candy, were one inclined to touch it.

The bus ride went well. My sister and I enjoyed the attention given us by the adult passengers. We also got to sit close to the bus driver, whose responsibility it was to see that we were met by the right person when we reached our destination, and I liked him because he kept flipping butterscotch candies (all of which my sister caught) our way. He told stories about his little girl back home and how she loved to milk their goat, Raphael. I thought of the bus as a kind of moving house because it had fans and a toilet at the back.

My grandmother had packed us ground-roast-with-ketchup-and-onion sandwiches, bananas, homemade donuts, and a large thermos of milk, along with our clothes and various other belongings, in a beige duffel bag. I had packed my new traveling case—which I held on my knees with two hands for the entire trip. In it I placed some writing paper, a pencil and sharpener, a flashlight my grandfather had given me a long time before, and a favorite rock from my collection. I also made sure to include the sample of asbestos I was given while on a grade-one trip to the mines. The asbestos was especially important to me because I believed it was something like Superman's kryptonite—except it didn't make me weak, but strong, super-strong. It was a narrow, rectangular, piece with long, thin shards of silver and blue. It felt smooth when I ran my finger over it in one direction, and prickly when I did the same thing in the reverse direction. One streak glinted a deep violet if the sunlight caught it at just the right angle.

The bus stop was unmarked on the secondary highway where we were to disembark, where the narrow gravel shoulder fell quickly away to steep ditches that bordered that part of the woods. Our mother was waiting there for us, leaning against a tall sign detailing the rules that visitors must follow when they enter a national park. She was wearing dark pink sandals, and her toenails were painted crimson. "I'm glad your bus got here a little late," she said. "I was a little late myself. I had to give my nail polish time to harden before I came traipsing through these woods." She extended her hand, a gesture intended to get me to hand her my red case, but I nudged my sister so she'd hold out the duffel bag instead. "What you got there," my mother

asked, nodding at the case as she accepted the beige bag, "some kind of game or something?" I told her that it was nothing, just something that was mine.

It was nearing sundown, and though I didn't feel tired, it seemed to me that the distance from the highway through the tall pines to the cottage on the lakefront was long. And my mother and sister walked far enough ahead of me that I felt I had to keep up a pace just shy of running. So when we at last reached the cottage, I climbed onto a chair in the kitchen and asked my mother for a drink of water.

"It's orange juice you both need . . . Stay there, I hate having too many people rummaging around the kitchen all at once . . . I'll get you some." She selected two cups from a cupboard above the sink and had started for the fridge when, suddenly, her head jerked back as though she had been hit. "There he is," she hissed. "Hurry up, one of you pass me the broom . . . there, in the corner."

While my sister appeared to be concentrating on whatever she saw outside of the window, I did as my mother said. The broom was not a regular corn broom like the one my grandmother used at home. This one had much longer strands, and was cylindrical, not rectangular. Careful not to come too close to her, I stretched my arm out to hand the broom to my mother who, in turn, stretched hers out to hand me the empty cups. She then stood, both hands on the handle of the broom that she raised directly above her head, and waited. My sister turned abruptly from the window.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"Shhh . . . quiet . . . or he won't show himself," my mother whispered. And then when he didn't show himself, she said, "Damn it, I'll have to get the peanut butter." She placed the broom on the floor and tiptoed to a counter beside the fridge where there sat a small jar of peanut butter. She unscrewed the lid slowly, not to make noise, and placed the open jar on its side about four feet in front of the refrigerator. Then she picked up the broom and resumed her former position. We all waited. In an instant, a tiny brown creature shot out from under the fridge, a ball

of dust stuck to the end of its tail.

It seemed to me as though the mouse knew it was caught in a trap, because halfway between the fridge and the jar, it executed a full halt in the rodent manner. And it was what transpired in the following few seconds that I have carried, in memory, for all the years of my life. To this day I swear that the mouse deliberately paused for what seemed like a long, long moment. Near the end of that moment, it found itself paralyzed by my mother's glare. Then it took the full impact of the first blow—but didn't run away. Instead, as yet not seriously harmed, the mouse raised itself on its back legs, drawing itself up to its full height, and clasped together its front feet—tiny hand-like feet—first at the level of its chest, and then at the level of its eyes. The broom came down again, and again, and again. Each blow, I believe, was more forceful than the one before.

When it was all over, I heard my sister's relieved voice, "You did it, Mom."

I looked from the mouse to my mother. She appeared both irritated and amused.

"What's the matter," she said to me, "haven't you ever seen anyone kill a mouse before?"

My mother's words somehow neutralized the situation, so that when my sister asked where our father was, I focused more on her excitement than on the poor creature's final moments.

"There's only one long pier out front. Your father's on it."

We both ran from the cottage as fast as we could, me at my sister's heels, and when we got halfway across the wide gravel area between it and the pavilion and looked out to the end of the pier where three men stood talking, my sister came to a complete stop and made an about-turn. She just stood there for a time. I wondered why she stopped, and recognized that she was bewildered but didn't understand why. Saying nothing whatsoever to me, she ran back to the cottage. Naturally, I followed. She threw open the screen door.

"Which one is he?"

My mother peered out the door before she answered in a matter-of-fact tone.

"He's the one in the white slacks."

My sister turned abruptly and so did I. We ran again, just as fast as before, to where our father stood at the end of the pier with two other men. We stopped beside him and waited for his response to our arrival. He smiled at both of us and briefly tousled my sister's hair.

"You people want some ice cream?"

I thought it strange then, and still do find it strange, that our father should greet us in such a way. I'd never heard anyone call kids "you people" before. I would have expected him at that moment, to look at me, especially, and say something like, *Hey, I've never seen you before,* or, *Now, you would be Annie.*

We followed him down the pier and into the pavilion, a long wooden building in which teens and others played pool, bowled, sat on the high stools at the snack bar. When we arrived, no one was working behind the snack bar, and it took me a few minutes to figure out that our father was the guy who belonged there. The ice cream was different from any we'd seen. It came out of a machine and didn't look like ice cream at all. But it tasted better than any I'd ever had in my life. We sat up at the bar where a few hairy-chested men sat in baggy tank tops and long, plaid shorts, their caps pushed far back off their foreheads. Everybody except my sister and me was sweating, even though the four bamboo fans that hung from the pavilion's low roof were running and all the lights were turned off. Two of the men smoked huge, stinky, brown cigarettes. My sister and I whispered as we ate our cones.

"*What kind of cigarettes are those*?" I asked.

"*They're not cigarettes, dummy, they're cigars.*"

In Ayer's Cliff lots of people smoked, but they smoked cigarettes or pipes.

"*How do you know that*?"

"*Because we did a study on Cuba in school after we had to practice hiding under our desks—cigars are Cuba's best export feature.*"

"Really?"

"Yep. And Cuba got so mad that it stopped sending us cigars and so now cigars are against the law."

"You mean these guys might get caught and go to jail?"

"Probably not. They probably got lookouts. Besides, they wouldn't go to jail here, they'd probably get sent to Cuba and shot by a firing squad. There's a firing squad there."

"What's that?"

"That's where you get blindfolded and have one last wish and then a bunch of guys shoot you."

"Grammie says if you don't stop fooling me I'm gonna end up nervous and then you're gonna have something to answer for."

"I'm not fooling. Don't you ever pay attention to anything on TV? Cuba thinks we're nothing but a bunch of pigs and everybody says that we made a big mistake not figuring out in good time just how much they hate us. Should have had that all figured out before they shot our last president's head off."

"We haven't got a President. We're Canadians."

"Are not. We were both born on this side of the border. That makes us Americans. Don't matter that we live in Canada."

"When we get back I'm telling Grammie that you're always trying to fool me."

With this, we both stared at the cigar-smoking men. I tried to imagine them in front of a firing squad made up of very piggish Cubans (all with long, scraggly beards like that one Cuban I remembered from TV) smoking cigars and jeering about Americans who don't know any better than to get caught smoking illegal cigars.

"You girls," our father said, "say hello to Bradley and Robert." He nodded in their direction and we said "Hi" in unison as our father continued. "Take Bradley, here. Bradley's a juggler. If you ask, maybe he'll show you."

"What is it you juggle?" my sister asked.

Bradley spoke with a squat cigar stub stuck in one corner of his mouth. He moved closer to us, shifted along by two stools.

"Anything," he said as he maneuvered the stub with his tongue and lips over to the other corner, "anything in the world—you name it, I juggle it."

The two men laughed, and so did our father, as though something was really funny, but I didn't because I thought he was lying and God would know it.

"I bet you can't juggle heavy stuff," I said.

"I used to," he said, "but I'm outta practice now." He grabbed his large belly with his pudgy hand. "Afraid I'm outta shape now, too. Had one too many," he said, and he nudged my sister's ribs with his elbow, "if you know what I mean."

They laughed again. This time my sister joined in. My father appeared especially amused. He laughed silently, in his throat, the whole business kept under control by a wide, knowing grin. But I didn't laugh this time either because I didn't know what this Bradley meant. Suddenly I felt sick to my stomach.

"*Let's go back to the cottage*," I whispered to my sister.

"That's a good idea," my father said, "you people probably haven't even had a chance to unpack yet." Then he leaned over the counter and put his mouth up to my ear. "And don't think we can't hear what you're saying when you whisper." He said this loudly, in a mock whisper. As we climbed down from the tall stools and made our way to the cottage, the sound of the men's inexplicable laughter followed us. I turned to my sister and said, "I don't know about you, but I want to go home."

"Not me," she said. "Bet we're gonna get to ride in a motorboat."

My sister and I slept in a small bedroom with two cots off a tiny sitting room. Our parents' bedroom was on the other side of that room. Except for the window in the kitchen, all of

the cottage windows faced the lake. The shore was only a few steps from the front door that opened onto a decaying wooden veranda. On it were two frayed rattan chairs with worn, floral cushions. Underneath one of these chairs, our parents' mid-sized mongrel, Pumpkin, lay. Our mother told us that he could usually be found lying there during the day and that at night he stayed under one of the cots in our room. She also warned us that he wasn't a playful dog, that he preferred keeping his distance from people. Had she been there, my grandmother would have had something to say about this. She'd taught us about unfriendly dogs. *Ugly. A dog that's ugly is dangerous, I tell you—ought to be put down.* My sister and I left Pumpkin alone and fought briefly over who was to claim the most comfortable chair. Since she was older, victory was almost always hers on matters of territory—this I had become used to—but if we had been at home I would have put up a bigger fight.

Because that summer the heat was scorching, the existence of the most negligible breeze off the lake a matter of daily dispute among the people who frequented the snack bar, our cottage was stifling. The two main doors (off the kitchen and the sitting room) to the inside of the screen doors remained open, even through the night. Inside the cottage I felt as though there was no air to breathe, and what air was present was so heavy that even the portable fans blowing it around failed to turn it into something you'd want to breathe. So that we would feel cooler our mother covered the curtainless windows with tea towels every mid-day, and we never turned lights on, even at night. I said that I didn't think a light bulb could actually make a room warmer than it already was, but our mother did not agree. She asked me since when did I become an expert on heat and electricity, anyway. So the only light we had in the cottage at night was cast by the TV, its low-intensity, silver glow made hazy by our father's cigarette smoke. Our mother told us never to sit in our father's chair if we knew what was good for us. Armed with free-standing ashtrays on either side, it was the only chair facing the TV.

One extremely hot evening, in the middle of a swimming lesson put on by the Red Cross, I had to run from the lake to the cottage to use the bathroom, and on my way out I noticed that

Pumpkin was sleeping, or resting, on my sister's cot. His paws hung over the edge of it and his snout stuck out between them. He was panting from the heat and looked like he needed some kind of solace. I got on my knees in front of him so that we were at eye level. I think I asked him if he was lonely and then moved, slowly, closer to him, intending to give him a kiss, when, instantly and without warning, he bit my face. He didn't bite just once. He latched onto my nose and chin simultaneously with the first bite, and then he pulled back and released. And before I could move (it all happened so fast), he bit twice more, inflicting more damage to my nose, chin, and lastly, I think, to my gums. Then he stopped as instantly as he'd begun and slowly lowered his snout into the position it was in when I first approached him. I grabbed the iron bar that ran the length of the cot and pushed myself away from it and from Pumpkin.

Stunned for a second or two, I sat on the floor wondering what had happened. When I saw a few blood drops on my legs and the floor, I screamed but then remembered that there was no one there besides me and Pumpkin, and I put my hand to my face, thinking I should run to the bathroom and look in the mirror. Feeling nothing there at all, not even when I pinched my cheeks, my first thought was that I had been partly devoured. I screamed again. This time I heard a screen door slam and my mother calling out, "Where are you? What's wrong?" By the time she arrived, the terror I felt at the thought that I might be missing facial parts was intensified by the sight of blood now pouring onto my chest, my bathing suit top, my legs, the floor. Both of my hands, too, were covered in blood because I was hiding my wounds behind them. My mother dropped to her knees and grabbed my elbows.

"Move your hands!" she shouted.

"I can't! I can't!"

She wrenched my hands away from my face and looked at me, not with horror or shock as I expected, but with steely calm, her lips set in a thin, tight horizontal line.

With simple determination she said, "You come with me."

Once I was on my feet, I realized that the only reason I was walking at all was because

my mother had me by my right arm, the upper part, so that it stuck way up in the air in an unnatural fashion, and she propelled me forward in such a way that I needed to walk on my tiptoes in order to compensate for how out of balance she made me. As a result I walked crookedly, and my head hung down and to the left, blood still dripping onto what was at first the cottage linoleum, then the gravel, then the crude wooden steps that led up to the pavilion door, and finally the maple floor inside. Maybe it was because I felt dizzy and because my mother's grip kept me in an awkward position that I couldn't look in front of me or raise up my head. All I could do was attempt to compose myself there, at the end of the snack bar, still in my mother's grip, deprived of balance and of an ability to do anything about my drooping head. I raised just my eyes.

The snack bar was busy. Lots of men and teenagers, all appearing to me as though they were sideways, stopped what they were doing and looked at me. The sounds of conversation, of joviality, died out. My father, a hand towel tossed over one shoulder, was scrubbing a small sink behind the counter. He approached us when my mother called him in a loud, hushed voice, a voice that reminded me of the way one cat burglar might chastise another. Though I couldn't see either my mother's or my father's face, I imagined they were both furious. My mother sounded as though she spoke with her teeth clenched but was still able to yell, if she wanted.

"Look what *your* dog did to *her* face!"

I wanted to apologize to all of the people at the snack bar. They'd had to look at blood, saliva, and mucus dripping in long streams to the floor—and possibly even some kind of amputation—at a time when they were eating and having fun and holidaying. I placed my free hand over my face as best as I could, so they wouldn't have to see. And realized I didn't mind the pain as much as their having to see me, and their knowing what a terrible mistake I'd made.

My mother snatched the tea towel off my father's shoulder and pushed it onto the back of the unmoving hand that covered my face. "Here," she said, without noticing that the towel dropped straight to the floor, "take this." And with that, she swung me around and took me back

to the cottage in just the way we'd come.

By the time we arrived, my sister was back from swimming lessons and the sun was beginning to set. She screamed outright when she saw my face. I asked her if there was anything bitten right off and she said, "I don't think so. But you sure do look exactly like a monster." When I finally got to lie down, my mother gave me an aspirin and told me we'd have to go for stitches in the morning, something that would have worried me more if I hadn't needed to sleep so badly.

It wasn't until what seemed like the middle of the night that I awoke. The fact that as usual there was no way to cool the room didn't help the fire that burned in my face. I woke my sister by pulling on the shoulder strap of her babydolls and started to cry.

"If you cry, you'll just make it worse," she said. Her tone was sympathetic. It was always plain to me that even though my sister delighted in my discomfort, she never relished true suffering. "Try to sleep," she said as she patted my shoulder, "and, don't worry."

"I want to go home."

"We will, don't worry . . . try to sleep. Things will be better in the morning."

"What are stitches like?"

"I don't know. Try not to think about it. Think about home."

I said okay I would, and went back to my cot. Not many moments later I knew from the sound of her breathing, a comforting sound, that she was asleep again. And I got up again, this time to get my traveling case. I kept it at the foot of the cot, covered with a blanket. From it I took my piece of asbestos and placed it under my pillow, thinking it would help me be strong. I tried to sleep but I couldn't, and I didn't stop crying until I heard my father come home. Through half-closed eyes (I pretended to sleep) I saw his shadowy figure come into our bedroom and heard Pumpkin's claws on the floor as he tried to get traction, scrambling out from under my sister's cot. My father stood beside her for a time, just watching her sleep, and then he came over to me. He sat on the edge of my cot, and Pumpkin thumped down on the floor beside him. I was

scared that Pumpkin was in trouble, thought that maybe my father would punish him, but to my surprise he didn't. Instead, he turned on a flashlight and shone it, slowly and deliberately, around the perimeter of my face, pausing to inspect my nose, mouth, and chin longer and more closely. When he switched it off, he just sat there, still, for what seemed like ages, looking from me to Pumpkin. From Pumpkin to me. Finally, he reached out and placed his hand on my cheek, his touch was both gentle and electric, and, believing that I slept (I think), he spoke as one more pensive than troubled. "Some day, Annie, you'll understand that this is how people learn." Then he leaned down and rubbed the dog's head, scratched him under the chin, and, in a playful tone whispered, "Hey boy, what the hell got into you today?"

The two of them then rose and left the room.

Chapter VI

The day we returned to Ayer's Cliff, our grandmother picked us up at the bus station. She looked as though she'd been there for a long time. Her slender legs crossed, she held her purse by its long, brass clasp on one knee, her hands pressed together at the thumbs. That day she wore her olive pillbox hat with a pheasant's feather curving over its top, like a rainbow. She nearly cried when she saw me, and that was scary because I thought that meant my mouth and nose would always be puffy and blue, but when we got home, she took time to explain that she'd been moved not only because my face looked sore but also because she was so happy to see me. She'd missed me so much she could hardly stand it. And she just couldn't see me ever going away again. I hugged her, hard, around the thighs, and cried myself. At the time I didn't know why, and when she asked me what all my crying was about, I couldn't think what to say, there were so many things. Things hard to put into words. Telling her about the doctor who did the stitches seemed the easiest place to start. "He told me," I said, "that I'll have big scars all around my mouth for the rest of my life." When she heard this, she opened her mouth and drew in a short, audible breath, devised, as it always was with her, to prohibit any words from escaping, and followed, as it always was with her, by a brief pursing of her lips before she spoke. She said she'd never heard of anything so ridiculous in her life and that that doctor was nothing but a foolhead, and to prove it, she was going to march me right over to Dr. Brown's house, and he'd straighten out just what was what. She did, and Dr. Brown did straighten things out and tell us that any marks I might have in the future would be slight and not be of the nature that would be bothering me much.

I learned I'd have to have those stitches for ten days in total, so I had a ways to go once I got home. My grandmother made me all kinds of soft foods so I wouldn't have to suffer through

a lot of chewing, and my grandfather used the big knife to take shavings off the bricks of maple sugar he kept in the store's freezer. By about the third day home, the day my mother came to visit, I was getting more used to looking at myself in the mirror. Plenty of my skin was blue all right, but I realized that the blue stitches made the wounds appear bluer than they really were, and parts were just beginning to turn purple. I took that as a good sign because the purple hurt less than the blue.

I remember only a portion of my mother's visit, just the part when she, my grandmother, and I were in the kitchen, cleaning up after lunch. A strange quiet came over the room and my mother asked me to come over and sit on her lap. This puzzled me because she'd never asked anything of the sort before. Certainly not at the lake and there'd been plenty of opportunity for that kind of thing there.

"There's something I want to talk to you about, Annie. Come over here and sit on my knee for a minute."

I did, and my mother put her arm around my waist.

"Your father and I," she said, "are moving to a place quite a ways from here."

"Aren't you quite a ways already?" I asked.

"Yes, but this is a new place."

"Not the lake?"

"No. Not the lake. We're going to a place straight down from there if you look on a map. Straight south. It's not on a lake, it's on an ocean. And there's lots of sandy beaches there, big sandy beaches. And to get there from here, we'd all have to take the airplane."

The thought of going on an airplane struck me as miraculous. In Ayer's Cliff you never saw airplanes, just streaks of white in the clear blue sky, way, way up. Whenever kids spotted a streak, they would call out, "Airplane! Airplane!" and all of the others within hearing distance would come running, look up, and just stand there, mouths gaping.

"We get to go on an airplane? I've heard they're *huge* close up."

"They are. And they're fun to ride on too. You and Grace will love the plane. And the ocean."

It was mostly with a sixth sense that I kept track of my grandmother during the conversation. I didn't follow what she was doing with my eyes but I perceived her movements. Normally she perfomed her kitchen movements with ease. She moved quietly and effortlessly in the kitchen, always, whether she was baking, cooking, or cleaning up. And she moved smoothly, getting things done without ever appearing rushed, frazzled, or in a hurry. As I sat on my mother's knee, I could tell there was something different about my grandmother. She was moving more slowly, and stopping and starting in unfamiliar rhythms. Suddenly, I was aware of the fact that she had stopped moving completely. All of her. When I turned away from my mother to check on her, I saw that she stood at the sink with her hands just dangling above the soapy water, her forearms resting on the edge. Her back was straight, as always, but her head was held in an attitude I'd not seen before. In order for it to look the way it did from behind, her chin would have had to be nearly touching her chest. Startled, I turned to my mother.

"Are Grammie and Grampa coming with us?"

"No. Just us. Me, you, Grace. She's excited about going. And your father's already there."

I jumped off her knee and ran to where my grandmother stood, right beside her leg, and viewed my mother momentarily from that distance. In that place, in that proximity, precisely where I stood, my grandmother would normally, automatically, and without interruption to her kitchen work, have placed her hand on my shoulder. These were casual, affectionate shoulder checks, like kisses. In that moment, though, she remained still.

I wedged myself between the cupboards beneath the sink and my grandmother's legs and grabbed her apron. Because she suffered from hay fever, her apron pockets were always bulging with Kleenex. I took the smooth material between the pockets and held it up to my mouth, still tender, still throbbing when I talked or chewed too much. Through the starched cotton I said,

"I'm not going." My mother just sat there and my grandmother simply remained standing as she had been. It seemed everything, all sound, all motion, all life even, just stopped. Then my mother slowly rose from the chair and left. She descended the stairs to the store, or to the alley door, I didn't know which.

Just then, after she had left, I was seized by an unfamiliar panic. I still don't know if I was scared or furious. I fell to my knees as hard as I could, hoping to make as loud a noise as possible. This forced my grandmother to step back from the sink and I grasped her, hard, around the shins and calves.

"No!" I screamed louder, and longer, probably, than I ever had. "No matter what," I cried, and tried to catch my breath, "I won't go . . . I won't go." For the first time, I thought my voice came, not from me, but from somewhere else in the room. My grandmother pulled me to a standing position and sat down on a three-step kitchen ladder. Then we were the same height.

"Maybe," she said, "*maybe* we can all decide things so you and Grace won't have to go. And maybe if you do have to, Grampa and I will fix things so we'll all go together. We'll come with you. Don't cry. Everything will be all right. Calm down. Everything's going to work out just right, you'll see."

She took a Kleenex out of one of her fat apron pockets and dabbed the tears that were streaming down my face.

"Now, don't cry. It won't do you a bit of good. None whatsoever. And think about your stitches, these tears are going to make them sting like the dickens, sure as anything."

She stopped, then, and looked at the Kleenex at close range. "Now how do you like that? I'm wiping you off with a used Kleenex. Doesn't that beat all?"

I laughed, and so did she.

"It doesn't matter," I said, "it's still good." But I kept crying and I told her that no matter what, I wasn't going to live anywhere else and no matter what I wasn't going anywhere without her and without Grampa. "*Nowhere whatsoever*," I shouted. And she said that was fine, and

everything was fine, and not to worry about anything.

Over the next couple of days I learned that the weather in Ayer's Cliff hadn't been any better while we were gone than it was before we left. And no better than it was where we'd been. My grandmother said that if we didn't get some rain soon, to cool things off, she might just have to go straight out of her mind. I always laughed whenever she said that. *Wait and see,* she'd always say whenever her patience ran out, *I'll have to go straight out of my mind, and then what?* She also told me that maybe now that my sister and I were back, we'd get some rain, *and no requesting the Lord for it at church, mind you.*

But it didn't rain in the three weeks that followed. Not a single drop. And the heat seemed as though it would never let up. All of life and all of the figures peopling it, from what I could see through the store's giant front windows, appeared as though they were moving in slow motion. The last sweltering days of August that summer were days that brought most people to Main Street more purposefully, less casually, than would other days. In the mornings, people laboring under such conditions seemed more spirited, slightly more animated despite—or maybe because of—gasping for air. As if they wanted to say, *This weather's no impediment to me*, as if they wanted to say, *Gonna take a whole lot more'n this to slow me down.* While in reality they came into the store and complained about how the damnable heat was sure as hell gonna be their ruination.

By afternoon the ones who showed up in the morning moved slowly among the fresher ones who appeared at noon. They sauntered across Main Street; they plodded from one task to the next; they sat on the white-painted benches with fancy black iron armrests and drank cola and iced tea. The women smoked and rolled their nylons down to their ankles. The men, too stubborn to remove their black and white tweed hats, chewed tobacco and wiped at sweat and spittle with the wrinkled, stained handkerchiefs they kept stuffed in their back pockets. They behaved as though they had all the time in the world. As though there was little new to see, little different to

buy, little distinct to say. When they met and spoke, they talked past one another's shoulders; they nodded, either profoundly or vaguely, and squinted hard into the distance, though the sky was not bright but dull and hazy; they looked behind them—either up street or down street. Maybe these were the kinds of actions that led my grandmother to conclude that people didn't even pay attention to what they themselves were saying. She always said that people had no idea what they were talking about. *No idea whatsoever.* Unlike my grandmother, my grandfather never said anything about people not knowing what they were talking about. He never even intimated such a thing. In fact, he always told me that every person had a special way of looking at things. And that everybody had different ways. He often said he was lucky to have the store because it gave him a chance to see what people need and what they like. When they came in, he usually knew what to say. And that was good.

One such hot day, toward evening, not too long before the first day of school, I was helping my grandfather with end-of-month inventory, counting canned beans, removing broken cookies from the bulk cookie boxes, when Wilbur Lore came in and bought some licorice cough-candies and four quarts of orange juice.

He was a classmate of mine, and it seemed to me our grade-one year had been a good one for him. It had taken me some time to get over how he looked, but once that happened I found myself liking to look at Wilbur. He was a child much smaller than the rest of us, and deformed. His left shoulder blade—most called it the wing bone—was sharp and angular. It thrust up and out so drastically that it almost reached the bottom of his neck. The long line of his spine, beside and below the wing bone, was crooked, like an old man's walking stick—not an old man's real walking stick, but one more crooked, one more like you hear about in nursery rhymes. I guessed it was because Wilbur's back was so thrown out of line that one leg was shorter than the other—so much so that the lift on his boot looked half a foot high, and still he limped. His face and ears, too, were deformed. My grandmother said the doctors tried to make the cleft palate and harelip better, but something hadn't gone right, and the crumpled ears they couldn't do a thing about.

Wilbur rarely closed his mouth. I didn't know then that this was because he had difficulty breathing through his nose and, evidently neither did our first-grade teacher. "Wilbur," she'd say, "we won't be catching flies just now, will we?" Wilbur always pressed his lips together and smiled when she said this, smiled that impossible, jagged, but essentially achieved smile that I so loved. And he kept it until she looked away—pleased with herself, probably—until his normally pale skin reddened and his jaw fell slack.

Wilbur looked whiter than usual, the blue veins under the translucent skin at his temples were normally smooth and nicely submerged, like fine cracks beneath clear ice in spring, but that evening in the store they bulged when he tried to lift the grocery bag. I don't know if it was the heat bothering him, but when he clasped the bag to his body, whether with both arms on the right side, left side, or in the middle, he just couldn't seem to get his legs going and, so my grandfather suggested I carry the bag and walk Wilbur home.

We crossed Main Street and headed for Wilbur's house. I walked beside him but not too near him. His side-to-side gait made him seem wide, he needed quite a lot of sidewalk space, though really he was very narrow and thin. But I did walk as close to him as possible so I could hear him when he spoke. He was a soft-spoken kid.

All of Wilbur's grade-one mates had learned to understand him when he talked, though he didn't talk often. All those consonants and vowels that we produced as easily as we breathed seemed to wander around in remote, twisted and unmapped territories of his sound-producing system. I think most of us understood what he said mostly by the rhythms in his talk more than by the words he struggled to pronounce.

Do you believe in flying saucers?

"Do I believe in flying saucers? No. My grandmother says there are no such things." Wilbur looked sad at this.

I do.

"You do? Well, that's okay, they say all kinds of people believe in flying saucers."

This is all we said on the way to his house. When we arrived I stood there, feeling awkward, not daring to step onto the veranda. Scared it might cave in.

Thanks, Annie.

"Thanks? Oh, it's nothing. You're welcome."

You want to come in and see the skylight my Mom cut in the ceiling of my room?

"You say your Mom cut a hole in your ceiling, Wilbur?"

I looked up to the roof of the house. It was covered with the same grainy, gray shingles covering the rest of the house. There I saw the outline of a smoky glass bubble—the first skylight I'd ever seen—the only one in Ayer's Cliff, for sure.

"Wow. You're lucky."

Come see.

"Come see? Well, maybe. If I hurry."

Wilbur laughed, a complex series of snorts and gulps, and slapped his thigh as he always did when he was excited. Suddenly his weakness, his lethargy, or whatever it was, vanished.

As we climbed the steps that led to the veranda I nearly changed my mind about going in. They creaked and gave. I wondered if we would fall through the warped planks either on the stairs or on the veranda, but everything held out and before I knew it we were inside the house. The kitchen was messier and dirtier than any place I had ever seen. *The filthiest mess in God's creation,* my grandmother would have said. The stove, at one time white, was covered in great brown and black splotches. And everywhere, beer bottles. Empties in cases, half-filled ones—some with cigarette butts floating—empty bottles on their sides on the floor. I set the bag on top of some newspapers that were spread all over the kitchen table.

Come on upstairs.

"Are we going upstairs, Wilbur?"

Yes.

"Yes? Good, okay."

The staircase was much more like a ladder than a staircase. So steep, and narrow. I could hardly believe how adept he was at climbing this structure. It went almost straight up, and just above the last rung, or step, was a square opening through which we crawled into Wilbur's attic room. The room was tidy but not clean. Wilbur's clothes, what he had of them, were folded and neatly stacked on a small case—a case that might otherwise serve as a bookcase. His bed, a cot really, was covered with a blanket that had figures of Roy Rogers, Dale Evans, Trigger, and Buttercup.

"Do you like cowboys?" I asked.

No. My Mom does. I like birds. Nighthawks. They're all wings, don't have any feet.

"You like hawks? That's why your Mom cut out this skylight, so you can watch the hawks?"

No.

Wilbur sat on the side of his cot, we both did, and looked up through the skylight. The moon, an illusion that evening, was huge and orange. Magnificent.

Look. I got a special bell.

Wilbur pointed to a corner in his room, the corner near his clothes case on one wall and a tall window on the adjacent one. A couple of feet from the ceiling in that corner hung a fairly large, tarnished and heavily dinted bell, not like the one in the steeple at Beulah's United downstreet but one more like you sometimes see on TV, hanging on the front veranda of some big cattle ranch. A partly unraveled, braided cord knotted at the end hung from its center. Wilbur pushed hard on the bed with one hand, hard enough to create some momentum, and got to his feet.

Got it from one of my Mom's friends. Only certain people can hear it ring.

He gripped the cord with two hands and swung it back and forth. The clapper, a round object wrapped in old rags, made only a muffled sound as it struck the inside walls of the bell.

"Willy!" It was Wilbur's mother. "C'mon down and meet—wait—*what's your name*?

She laughed, a kind of high-pitched, girlish laugh at this last.

We heard a low voice respond.

"Hank Williams, you say? Don't kid a kidder," she said. She laughed louder than before.

"C'mon Willy, c'mon!"

Wilbur ignored his mother for a time. Probably he was waiting for me to say something about his strange bell. I couldn't figure out why anybody would want a bell with no ring.

"What use is a bell like that Wilbur?"

He made his way back to the bed and, with one hand firmly holding the side of the mattress, he lowered himself onto one knee and with his other hand reached under the bed. He produced a tin box, painted black with a picture on its lid of maple trees, all decked with hanging buckets. He was breathing heavily, whether this was because of excitement or exhaustion I couldn't tell. He sat beside me and opened it. From within he removed a piece of purple construction paper, the kind we used in school for art. It had been elaborately folded.

Look. I got a plan all planned out.

Almost ceremoniously, Wilbur unfolded the paper and held it in front of me.

I could see what were supposed to be many stars. Some had lines joining them like you see in those connect-the-dot pictures. These made configurations that looked a lot like birds. Hawks, maybe. There was an object drawn freehand in the center of the paper and also some others in the four corners. All of the freehand figures looked like they were drawn with wax crayons.

Right away I could tell that the object in the center was supposed to be the raised gazebo at our end of Main Street. It was an ancient structure that made our village entirely different from all the others. Its covered rotunda, twenty-three steps above ground level, was spacious enough to hold Ayer's Cliff's marching band. The band, which marched down from the lake end of Main Street with the rest of the parade that opened the Massawippi Festival every spring, would climb those steps, still playing, while the rest of the parade rounded the corner and continued up the hill

to Massawippi, about two miles away.

"What's all this for, Wilbur?"

For when they come.

He pointed to the drawing in the center, to the gazebo.

They'll land here. I'll see 'em from my window. I'll ring the bell just like I showed you. Me, Charlie, Katie. We're going.

He pressed his right index finger to his lips and made a sound that was meant to come out like, *shh*, but sounded like, *tthugg*.

People float where they live.

"Willy!" His mother sounded impatient this time.

Slowly and painstakingly, as though he was practicing a difficult sequence on a wind instrument, Wilbur folded the paper, put it back in the box and replaced the lid. He left it on the bed, and, rising in his usual way, headed for the stairs.

I stayed on the cot and watched Wilbur maneuver himself into a position that would allow him to descend the stairs. I wondered how he'd made contact with whoever it was that was supposed to be coming for them. But I wondered even more how he'd been able to make plans with Charlie. And if he'd actually seen him.

"Wilbur," I whispered loudly, "how'd you happen to make plans with Charlie?"

Jimmy fixed everything.

Wilbur was slowly sinking, disappearing down the hole.

"You ever *seen* Charlie?"

Only Jimmy can. Or the plan's off.

By the sound of the arrhythmic thuds I could tell that climbing down was a far more arduous task for him than climbing up. I looked through the skylight, again, at the moon, and listened to the voices beneath me. The man's voice, clearer than before, caught my attention because, aside from Roy Rogers and some ranch cowhands on TV, I'd never seen a cowboy. I

heard that real-life ones sometimes came and sang at night in the bar at The Cliff House.

"Hank's gonna let you wear his cowboy boots, Willy. Be a good kid and put 'em on . . . he says you can keep 'em," his mother said.

I can't Mom. I can't walk in them.

I heard more of his mother's laughter and her insistence before everything died down and the two adults must have drifted off, off to some part of the house I'd not seen or cared to envision. Then I heard Wilbur laboring up that rise to his room, as though he carried an unbearable weight with him.

When he sat beside me on the cot, dangerously out of breath, we looked down at the black and gray snakeskin cowboy boots. We were both amazed, I think, to see that the toes were chrome-tipped. Drops of sweat fell from Wilbur's forehead onto the chrome and the floor, splashed like those first big drops of rain that take you by surprise before a sun shower. Somewhat dazed, we stared at the boots. Until long after Wilbur had caught his breath. He turned to me and smiled his smile, his little eyes gleaming, then he looked, again, at the boots.

These'll work good, he said at last.

Chapter VII

Grace and I met with the minister ten or fifteen minutes before the service, right at the funeral home. He'd asked us if there was anything special we wanted him to say at the service.

"Do you want me to say anything about the—" he hesitated "—the troubles in your father's life?" We sat mute, as though we couldn't think of a reasonable response, as though we weren't really in the same room.

"Your Aunt and Uncle requested something, well, something quite generic, and that's what I've prepared. They said your father would want it that way, but I thought it best to check with you."

Grace spoke up. "That's fine . . . what they told you," she said. "But I would like a minute or two to read a poem." She motioned, feebly, to the piece of paper she held in one hand. "I have one."

Before leaving our hotel room to go to the viewing that morning, I'd given Grace the anthology I'd packed. I didn't know what she'd selected for her reading, she'd done it while I was showering down the hall. When I got back, she was standing in front of the window. Having opened the venetians, she'd let horizontal shafts of morning sun flood the room. It was a bright, fresh June morning. I sat on the side of the bed, combing out my wet hair, and watched her for a time.

"Is it all the same?"

"Yup."

"Battry's Store?"

"Yup."

"Charlie Battry's door?"

"Exactly the same."

"Ayer's Cliff is beautiful, isn't it? As beautiful as we remember?"

"Yup."

I continued combing my hair, struggling with tangles. I wondered if she'd tell me about the poem.

"Grace," I said, my hair hanging over my face, nearly touching the floor, "I'm sorry I don't want to say anything at the funeral. I worry because that leaves you on your own."

"Don't worry about me." She turned her head to the side, so I could hear her plainly, I guess. "I want to do it. "

"What poem did you pick? I asked.

"One that I think might convey what he would want to say to us now. About how we shouldn't suffer. I already can't remember the title." Then she laughed. "That's it. That's the title: *Remember*.

"You're nice," I said. "You're nicer than I am."

She looked back out the window.

"Nope. Just more screwed up."

What surprised me most was that the funeral was so well-attended—I counted more than two hundred people—and so many of them people my father had gone to primary school with. Almost the entirety of his grade-one class was present, Henry said. People were there in good spirits, talking and laughing in the funeral home's gathering area. It was packed. One person stood back, watching us while we visited with our grandmother's sister, who lived next door, in the house she and our grandmother grew up in. He was a funny-looking man, and when he walked toward us, he looked as though he was making his way across an abandoned trampoline. He was thin, extremely thin, and his face was all smiling mouth with the kind of teeth that have wide gaps between them. He was dressed in light blue acrylic dress pants and what looked like a

navy high-school football jacket that was zipped right up to his chin; it was too short in the arms. The whole time he spoke to us, he kept his hands in his jacket pockets and made gestures with them. We could see his sharp, bony wrists.

"If it ain't Dick's kids. Sorry about your Dad. I remember you when you were this big." He indicated a height at about what must have been his pointy knee. He made me think of Jack Sprat who could eat no fat.

"You probably don't remember me from a hole in the ground, but I remember you. I'm Royce, Royce Chamberlain. Dick and I started school together." He laughed as though we should understand that that was really funny.

"Yup. Your father and I sure did start school together. Grade-one. Never forget the first day of school, never forget it if I live to be a hundred. Teacher, Eva Geer—she's dead now—says we're forbidden to go off school property at recess. First thing your father does is run across the street at recess time and climb that big maple tree sitting right on his father's property. And I'm saying he climbed *way* up. And it was tall as hell then, too. Eva Geer, all two hundred pounds of her, comes running out there after Eddy Taylor goes and tattles, and before you know it, half the school's out there watching the teacher yelling up at Dick. *Now you get down from there right now, right now I say, or you'll be sorry*, she yells up about as loud as she can. They must have heard her all the way to Boynton." Royce laughed so hard he teared up. "Never forget it. Your father yells back, *This is my own damn tree and you can kiss my ass*."

He took his right hand out of his pocket and eased a tear out of the corner of one eye, using his thumb knuckle. His laughter subsided as he watched the tear make its way to the base of his thumb. Eventually he looked at us and stuck his hand back in his pocket. "And that was no way near as comical as the time we went to the Granby Zoo and your father climbed the fence around the lions' den 'til security got hold of him." He laughed some more. "I'm telling you, these are things you never forget." Then he pointed at us through the material and said, "And don't forget, Dick got scouted by the Black Hawks. This town's never seen as talented an athlete

as your father, never before, and never since, maybe never again, I'd say."

Grace shook Royce's hand with both of hers and smiled warmly, and when she did this his tone and physical demeanor changed, even his pallor changed. From pale and waxen to pink. He stepped closer to us and placed his other hand on top of my sister's. His neck suddenly seemed stiff, his whole body unmoving, his eyes steadfast and fixed on Grace's. It was the posture you see people take when they want to make sure no one overhears them.

"These last few years I did what I could. Tried my best. I knew how much he liked reading the news, so I brought him papers every day. Every day I'd bring him two or three from across the line—my job takes me across the line everyday—'cause I knew how much your father loved the news, sports especially. And especially sports the way they report it in the U.S. papers." He glanced over his right shoulder and moved his head in closer, nearly between ours, and cast his eyes downward. The lines on his forehead deepened. "Just to give him something to look forward to," he said quietly.

Grace was not visibly moved by what Royce had said. In fact, she behaved as though she'd not actually taken much of it in. "Maybe we'll see you after the service?" she asked politely.

Henry had arranged a reception at The Cliff House.

"No, no," he said, shaking his head as he and Grace let go of each other's hands. He stepped back. "I'd like awful well to join the wake but I never go near the place. It's a drinking establishment. I'm a Christian who don't abide drinking, but you people have a nice time. And don't forget to step out on Main Street when you hear the bells. The Acadian Princess is gonna be in the parade again this year. Massawippi Festival."

"Acadian Princess?" I asked. There'd always been the parade and festival in June, but when we were there, there hadn't been any princess. I would have remembered, for sure.

"Yup," Royce said. "Every year for the last about ten, I'd say. Quite a sight. She's a Cajun up from Alabama or Mississippi on her way to that big Acadian Heritage Festival in

Halifax. Makes some stops along the way. Sets up her fortune-telling tent in Massawippi on route. All the kids get out there, I mean they *really* come running, out of their houses or wherever they happen to be, and chase after her, past the gazebo and up the hill far as they can, 'til they get all tired out. Quite a sight. She's a regular Pied Piper, I'd say."

Royce saluted us and moved off, into the crowd that was just starting to take seats in the chapel.

Denise came up behind us and chuckled, "Did he tell you he spends all day in his truck *singin' praises to the Lord*?" She covered her mouth with her hand and laughed, way down low.

The funeral began at two and ended thirty minutes later. The minister's several readings from the scriptures, none of which I remember, were delivered solemnly. Sitting in the first row, not many feet from the coffin, I felt as though everyone was staring at the backs of our heads and thinking, *There's Dick's daughters from out west, didn't even visit, didn't even take care of their father, hope my kids don't turn out that way.*

Naturally, I focused on Grace when she got up to speak. She began by thanking everyone for coming. And then she simply said she had a poem to read. She spoke calmly, gently, slowly. She said, "It's called *Remember*," and she read:

> Remember me when I am gone away,
> Gone far away into the silent land;
> When you can no more hold me by the hand,
> Nor I half turn to go yet turning stay.
> Remember me when no more day by day
> You tell me of our future that you planned:
> Only remember me; you understand
> It will be late to counsel then or pray.
> Yet if you should forget me for a while

And afterwards remember, do not grieve:
For if the darkness and corruption leave
A vestige of the thoughts that once I had,
Better by far you should forget and smile
Than that you should remember and be sad.

The reception, or wake, as Royce called it, took place in a rathskeller—a beer saloon in the hotel's basement. It was a gloomy place, smaller and less formal than the tavern on the main floor but large enough to hold everyone who cared to socialize after the service. Entering it, we were temporarily blinded as a result of coming in from the daylight. We'd walked from the graveyard which, that day, looked more like an outdoor section of a greenhouse than a place to bury the dead. In June, Ayer's Cliff exploded in color, flower baskets hung everywhere, and were nowhere more plentiful than in the graveyard.

When my eyes grew accustomed to the dim room, I first noticed that a woman wearing a white cotton shirt with three-quarter sleeves and a black apron that tied at both the waist and the neck was busy setting clean, dripping beer mugs and hi-ball glasses on blue terry cloth towels at one end of the bar. I supposed she was the same one who'd readied our room.

"Annie," Henry said, "you want a beer?"

"No thanks."

"Rye and coke? What do you drink?"

"Milk."

"Milk? You're kidding."

"No I'm not. I drink milk."

"I'll see if I can get you one. I'm having a beer. Grace, you want a beer?"

"Sure. I'll get it."

"No, no. Just sit down, relax. Does she really drink milk or is she pulling my leg?"

"She really drinks milk."

"Well, I'll see what I can do. It's a bit of an unusual request." He laughed, mostly to himself.

"Henry," I said, "who is that working behind the bar?"

"That's Katie Gagnier. You might remember her. She's a little older than you girls, I think. She works here at the hotel. Cleans rooms, bartends when Robert needs help or a day off."

"I don't remember the name. From over here she doesn't really look familiar."

"Used to be Katie Turner. Married Jean Gagnier—him you probably wouldn't know—from Lennoxville. Not sure where he is now. Neither is she, from what I hear." He nudged me in the ribs. "Hey, I'll tell her you want some milk."

"No, wait. Don't tell her anything about me." I grabbed Henry by the elbow. "And just wait, I want to ask you something." I checked to see if anyone could overhear us. Grace had moved off to socialize. "Do you remember when I called in March and told you what Dad said about having a gun?"

"Uh-huh."

"And I asked if you'd maybe go get it?"

"Uh-huh."

"Did you?"

"Sure I did. I took it to Ernest Stanley's' place. But your father went up there and created quite a scene, I guess. Least, that's what Ernest said. Anyway, he got it back. But he never got the bullets."

"Couldn't he have gotten some?"

"Now, you're worrying about something for nothing."

I pressed my shoulder into Henry's, getting closer just to make sure no one would hear. "But, at the funeral home, I saw a weird patch of hair." I touched Henry's head, indicating the area in question. "Looks like he might have—"

"No. No." Henry was emphatic, not open to discussion. "Your father was hit by a car. He died from a single impact. Chrome bumper made a dint, like in a ping pong ball." He tapped my head with one finger, hard, just back of the temple on the right side. "Got it right there."

"You're sure?"

"I'll get those drinks." He stepped away from me and then stepped back again and raised his eyebrows. "Milk?" he asked with a smile.

"Milk," I said.

I approached the bar, wondering if Katie Turner would remember me, not quite sure what to say, and was surprised to see that she had a little helper with her. She was a girl who looked about six or seven and even under the garish fluorescent light behind the bar I could see she was beautiful. Her hair, black and wavy, was done in French braids and her eyes were blue. I smiled at her, but she scowled at me as she placed wet beer mugs into a refrigerator. Katie noticed.

"Oh, don't mind her. She's grumpy right now."

"I remember you," I said, "You're Katie Turner, right?" She hadn't changed much. And she did resemble Ann Margret (as people in the store used to say), minus the smile, minus the sparkle. Her hands appeared raw, chapped and swollen. Probably from having them in water so much. I noticed her nails were chewed down to the nail beds, as far as would, at times, cause bleeding for sure.

"Was," she said, wiping her hands on the black apron and taking a long drag on the cigarette that had almost burned itself out in an ashtray beside the cash register. "Katie Gagnier now. But I'm thinking of changing it back. Had no husband in ten years. Took off, *ppfft*." She tossed one hand in the air and rolled her eyes. "What can I say? My daughter's name's Rosa, after my mother—you probably wouldn't remember her . . . never around in those days."

"I wasn't sure you'd remember me."

"Sure I do. And Grace and your grandma and grandpa. Oh, sure. Who could forget Hartson's Grocery?"

A smashing sound came from behind the bar. Rosa had dropped a mug.

"What the hell! Rosa—" she put her face up close to the girl's— "just go over there if you can't be of more help than that! Drivin' me crazy. Where's Larry, anyway?" Katie looked at me as though I would know. "He's takin' her to play with her cousins in Magog. Get her out of *my* hair. Naturally she doesn't want to go."

Rosa stood stock still, her lips pressed so tightly together they'd disappeared. She looked at me with big, round eyes.

"Wait," I said to Rosa, "let me help with the glass." I turned to Katie. "I'll help Rosa—accidents do happen."

"No kiddin' accidents happen."

Rosa brought me a broom and dustpan from the corner by the fridge, and, after she handed them to me, she wrapped her arms around my thigh and squeezed, maybe as hard as she could.

Katie wiped her red and swollen hands again and took another long drag off her cigarette. She said, "Just push her away if she's buggin' you."

"You know," I said as I swept the glass into the pan, Rosa hanging by then onto my back, "you know, I'm just going over to one of the tables over there, maybe eat a sandwich, visit a bit, and I was thinking that Rosa might want to come over and sit with me, take a break."

"Be my guest," Katie said.

Some people were standing, a few of those playing darts, others were sitting casually at the flimsy wooden tables eating sandwich triangles, drinking beer, talking, laughing, smoking. I took the girl by the hand and moved to one of the half-filled tables where Henry, Denise, Grace and a few others sat. I handed Rosa a cheese sandwich and we both sat. I was next to Henry, Grace was on his other side, and Rosa was beside me.

"Annie," Henry said, "I want you to meet a friend of mine, Grady Peasley."

Grady sat across from us. He looked something like Royce but without Royce's teeth problem. His eyes were pale blue and so was his complexion.

"Good to meet you," I said. "Are you related to Royce? You look like you might be."

"Royce? Sure. He's my cousin," he said, removing a toothpick that was stuck between his teeth. "His mother and my father are brother and sister." He replaced the pick. "Sorry about your Dad, I liked him awful well. Great hockey player. I kept his bike in good shape."

"Bike?" I asked.

"Oh sure. Didn't you ever see his bike? It was old but it was a good one. He got around on it real good. Anything go wrong with it, he'd just bring it into the shop. I'd fix her up."

Rosa helped herself to two more sandwiches, taking one in each hand.

"I didn't realize he got around on a bike," I said.

"Oh sure. Got around real good."

Just then an extraordinarily tall, thin male darkened the open doorway. He actually had to tilt his head in order to clear the frame. Rosa instantly shrunk down in her chair. The chatter quieted as he proceeded into the room and, without hesitation, chose a seat beside Grady. He greeted no one. Out of nowhere, it seemed, Katie was there with a beer. She set it down in front of him and then retreated without saying a word.

Grady smiled and clapped his arm around the man.

"Grace and Annie," he said, "have you ever met Larry?"

Part of me was absolutely dumbstruck. I didn't know what to say. I surely had never actually *met* Larry. Encountered him, yes. Definitely.

"No," I began, and stopped when I heard Grace indicating they'd not met, and explaining to Grady that the last time we'd been there we were eight and nine.

"These are Dick's girls, Larry," Grady continued.

Larry glanced at the two of us, without interest, it appeared, as he lifted the beer mug to

his lips. He wore a close-fitting jean jacket, buttoned only at the waist, ragged where the sleeves had been torn out at the shoulders. His right arm, the one he used for beer drinking, was tattooed above the elbow all the way around, up to the shoulder. In the dim room, I couldn't make out the design.

Without warning, Grady slapped Larry in the middle of his back, looking directly at me. Boisterous and animated, he said, "I bet you can't guess what Larry is famous for." Others at the table smiled and smoked and drank beer. Grace, too. I fixed my gaze on Larry, his eyes met no one's. Even when Grady spoke and I answered him, I didn't avert my gaze from Larry.

"I bet I can't," I said. "Why don't you tell me?"

"Aw, *Come On.* Guess." Clearly, Grady was having a good time.

"No, really Grady, I have no idea. None whatsoever. But okay, I'll guess." I wanted to look Larry dead in the eyes but they were evasive. From what I had initially seen, though, they were cold, unrevealing— "I'll say, let's see, I'll say . . . Larry is famous for having skinned a human being alive."

"Close!" Grady shouted. "Damned close! Larry, here, is famous for having had his face fall off. And they put it back on." Everyone at the table but Rosa, Larry, and me laughed.

"Really?" I said. "That *is* amazing, fascinating. Fascinating and unbelievable really, once you think about it." I didn't take my eyes off the man.

"He was riding his motorcycle up Brown's Hill like a bat outta hell," Grady said, "skidded on the first corner, and there it was, a big fat oak. Face hit the bark, got sheared clean off. Plastic surgeon fixed *it*; I fixed the bike. Neither one's got a mark to prove it.

"So I guess now Larry can't talk, huh?"

"Oh he can talk, all right. Just don't like to." People laughed again.

Larry reached for the package of cigarettes and the lighter in his jean-jacket pocket. It was one of those lighters that undresses a woman when you invert it. Just as he lit the cigarette he'd put in his mouth after flicking the bottom of the package, making one pop out, I thought I

heard music. At first I thought it was the jukebox, but the sound was coming from a distance. I listened harder and realized that it was coming from outside. Bells, or, no, the sound of tinkling rather than of bells is what I was hearing. More like timbrels or tambourines. Strange ringings and shouting.

The Acadian Princess! The Acadian Princess!

Rosa was the first to move. She leapt from her seat and darted through the door. I leaned forward and looked past Henry.

"Grace, you want to go see?"

"You know I hate parades."

I left the others and went out to Main Street. You could tell something was on its way from the sounds growing louder, the ringing as well as the resonate booming of a marching band. And while the sidewalks were not packed the way they are when a parade passes in a city, still there were lots of people watching. I scanned the scene for Rosa. She'd found some other children across the street, where she waited. Neither she nor her companions were able to stand still, they seemed to vibrate with excitement.

The Acadian Princess drove a low-slung black carriage studded along its rims with rhinestones. The heavily-muscled Clydesdale that pulled it was decorated with silver coins along its many harnesses and straps. The princess herself wore a purple satin sash on a bare midriff, a deep yellow full-length skirt with matching halter, and a bright red satin vest that flowed behind her, as did her long, long black hair that shone blue in the sun. Her sinewy, tanned arms—strong, almost manly—were coiled near the shoulders, with silver snakes. In one hand she held the reigns and in the other, high in the air, she held a colorless, crystal globe.

As Royce had said, children, lots of them, perhaps all of the kids in town, were in the street running after the Princess, coming dangerously close to the wheels, the huge hooves. I ran along too, not in the street as the children did, but along the sidewalk, weaving in and around the people, trying to keep an eye on Rosa. It was only a short distance from the hotel to where Main

Street was interrupted by a T-intersection at the gazebo, where the Princess would make a sharp turn left and ascend the hill to Massawippi. Not far behind me, I heard—despite the high trilling of the Princess' horse and carriage—a man's voice calling for Rosa. It was a commanding voice, harsh, angry. I kept moving as I looked back at Larry towering by a head above the crowd. He too was making his way down the sidewalk.

"Rosa!" he called.

What happened next was something I would never have expected. Royce hadn't mentioned it, but it was obviously a kind of ritual, well-known to the children, an anticipated event. The Princess stopped in front of the gazebo and set down the reins. Then, all the while waving to the laughing children who surrounded the horse and carriage, leaping like jumping beans, their arms outstretched, she moved swiftly to the back of the buggy, where she opened a large chest mounted there, the kind of chest you'd see on a pirate ship, and placed the crystal in it. Closing it, she blew kisses with both hands to all the kids who'd followed her, and, taking the reins in her right hand, she held the horse steady as, at the same time, she bent sideways from the waist, this move displaying the kind of flexibility you'd see in a trapeze artist, and firmly grasped one of the many outstretched arms. She raised Rosa into the seat beside her.

"Rosa!" Larry bellowed.

The Princess took no notice, likely she didn't hear, or maybe she did but paid no attention. Rosa, however, did notice Larry. At least I think she did because she glanced in his direction, her smile momentarily vanishing. The Princess shouted something to the other children, who responded by fanning out and backing away, and then she took the reins in both hands. With them she signaled to the Clydesdale, whose front legs raised a little off the pavement, and in an astonishing display of muscle, mane, and glistening fetlocks, that horse negotiated the corner and, with surprising speed, started the long climb uphill. The other children clamoured behind. The marching band, the last in the parade, had stopped playing and come to a halt until the Princess and children disappeared. Then it resumed its marching tune and climbed

the stairs of the gazebo where its members positioned themselves and began playing *I Wish I Was In Dixie Land*.

"Damn it all!" Larry shouted, seemingly unaware that now others were looking at him, not staring, just shooting sideways glances. He stood still among the people who moved into the street, closer to the gazebo.

I made my way back to the hotel, having to pass by Larry on the way.

"Rosa got picked," I said to Larry after stopping in front of him, careful not to get too close. "That's great fun for her, don't you think?"

Larry didn't acknowledge me; he was just staring at the corner, the spot where Rosa had disappeared. Then, as though my presence and words had made some distant impression upon him, he looked distractedly at me and said, "What would *you* know about carnies anyway?"

It was then I realized that Larry might actually be worried about Rosa. That he was probably thinking she was somehow unsafe, unprotected from who knows what. I could see worry in his eyes, just the eyes. And I could see too, looking at his expressionless face, that the left side of it was not quite right. All of the features on that side were turned upward, but only a little. The tail of the eyebrow, the outer corner of the eye, the flair of the nostril, the corner of the mouth. To a minute degree they looked *off* compared to the features on the other side, more off than the normal asymmetry in most peoples' faces.

"She might get to have her future told," I said.

Larry swung around and strode—he was bowlegged—to his motorcycle parked at the side of the hotel. After kick-starting the engine, he revved it three times and, with a roar loud enough to drown out the band, he shot around the corner and up the hill toward Massawippi.

Chapter VIII

A few days after I'd been to Wilbur's, and only one or two days before school started, it finally rained. We knew it was coming when the evening sky thickened. Not the way it did when a big storm was on its way, but the way it did when some small amount of rain was about to fall. By my bedtime, though, it still had not rained. And though the soreness had completely gone out of my face, I still couldn't sleep. What with the heat and the excitement about going back to school. I never did tell my sister about what I'd done when our mother talked to me about moving south. Not even when she asked. I didn't want to talk about it. The day following the one when I made that big scene in the kitchen, our mother left very early, before Grace and I got up, and as far as I was concerned she was more or less gone forever. In any case, I didn't worry. Instead, I thought about starting back to school, wondering if grade-two was as much harder than grade-one as my sister made out. And thinking too about the classmates in my neighborhood. I got up on my knees and looked out of the open window above my bed. Since it was night, I couldn't see much, and the streetlight shining in my eyes made the alleyway across the street impossible to make out. In the day I could just see one side of Katie's yard from my window, and the curve in the alley that went off to Jimmy's and Wilbur's houses. Everyone was in bed except my grandfather who was down in the store. Suddenly, I smelled rain in the air, and I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

When I opened them, I was startled to find that all was quiet, dead quiet, because the street lamps had gone out, something that had happened only once before. And I was stunned to see a dim glow, a mere slant of unobtrusive and slightly flickering light emanating from Charlie Battry's entryway. I must have felt strong knowing that for the time being all was as it should be. My grandmother and sister were sleeping, my grandfather was in the store—there, under soft

lights, or by candlelight if need be—as he always was on dark, hot nights, taking care of store business. And I decided to venture down the stairs and out the side door into black air that felt like velvet. Into a barely distinguishable, fine rain. Old Rude appeared from nowhere, in the manner that cats do, and followed alongside of me as I tiptoed across the street and toward the light. The door was about a third of the way open, pushed to the inside far enough for me to peer in.

Numerous jars filled with lightning bugs and placed at varying levels lit the cellar. In the uneven intervals of light, I saw at first only a solitary figure. It was the figure of a man, not a boy or an old man, not even a very middle-aged man. And he was a man made of flesh and blood—certainly he was no ghost—whose thick, black braid reached down his back, almost to his waist. He was straddling the kind of log one might use for a stool, his back not directly facing me, so that I saw his face almost, but not quite, in full profile. I was shocked to see that in place of an ear, this man had an impression, like a rivulet, that ran from where the ear should have been to nearly the full length of his neck. He was leaning forward, the forearm nearest me resting, crossways, on his knee. He held something in his other hand, some kind of utensil, and that hand appeared to be suspended in mid air at about chest height. Not far in front of whatever he held stood a structure, something that looked at first like it might be a tall chair.

I surveyed the cellar. It didn't look like the cellar beneath our store. Rather than having a dirt floor, the kind that rats love, this cellar had a floor made of stone, sections of slate that were jigsawed together. The floor looked clear of dust, almost polished. A wide, industrial-sized broom, like the one our janitor at school used, leaned in the corner. And there were shelves built along the walls of the cellar, and pinned to many of the edges of those shelves were drawings, and paintings—designs . . . no, not designs, figures that at first looked human, but as my eyes grew more accustomed to the strange light I saw that they were more like animal figures. My first impression was that even though these were not stuffed animal toys, this place looked more like a child's room than the cellar of a store.

I had stepped forward, to see the drawings more closely, when with absolutely no warning my foot slid painfully on the gravel beneath me. I cried out briefly before clapping both hands over my mouth. The man didn't react to these sounds. But in the instant that I slipped, I saw a flash of white at floor level quickly rise up, and, when this happened, the man turned his head and looked straight out in my direction. At first I thought this white thing was a ghost, and I almost ran away. Instead, I stayed, transfixed by the face of a man I'd never seen but had tried so many times to imagine. For surely, there had never been a time in my life when Charlie Battry did not exist.

His eyes were large, but not dark or foreboding. They were somewhat crystalline, clear-looking. The skin on his face was smooth—not wrinkly—and light-colored. His cheekbones and the lines of his jaw were sharp, angular. His mouth smiled, it seemed, while at rest. Even from where I stood, and even with such strange (though not exactly dim) lighting, I could tell that his eyes belonged to those of a kind person. In fact, it seemed to me that they were the eyes of some sort of priestly person. Not one you'd see at our church, not even one you'd see in any church in town. He made me think of a different god's prince—if there could ever be such a thing.

Apparently unable to see me, he turned to the white entity, and as he did so, I realized it was Katie Turner in a long, white nightgown. She stood there for a moment, also looking in my direction, but, obviously seeing nothing, she resumed her former position.

She sat on the stones, resting her back against the log that Charlie straddled. Her head was tilted to her left, resting on his inner thigh, her left hand held his heel, casually. Her right hand was raised to a ways above her head, to his chest level, where it was met, and embraced, by his. She held the paint brush. Together, they painted on paper, or perhaps it was something else that was propped on an easel before them. I stared at the image they worked on. As best as I could tell, it was, surprisingly, the image of a penguin.

Chapter IX

I thought I should walk to the bridge down at Angel's Falls. For no particular reason. It just seemed the decent thing to do. So the morning after our father's funeral, while my sister slept, I got up early. Having the funeral over with relieved me more than I'd expected. I felt good and strangely free. I thought about my boyfriend. I didn't miss him because I knew what it would be like if he was with me. He'd talk a lot about things I wouldn't care about and give answers to questions that I would not have asked. And neither of us would notice that while he was talking I would be going, *uh-huh . . . uh-huh . . . uh-huh*. I realized then, as I was crossing the street, that the only person in the whole world who I would have liked to be with that morning was my artist friend. That it would be so nice, so incredibly *nice*, to go on this walk with him. The morning was just as warm and clear and beautiful as any June morning could be. We would walk and he would notice things I never would, and I would remember them all, forever. *If I ever get married*, I thought, *it will have to be in Ayer's Cliff, early on a June morning*.

It was seven when I crossed Main Street, bought a can of apple juice from the machine outside the IGA, and, changing my mind about going directly to the bridge, walked instead down the alley next to Battry's store. It looked as though nothing had changed there since I left, nothing at all. I leaned against the concrete exterior of the IGA and eyed Charlie's entry. The same door, the same lattice, the same vines. I grabbed a wooden fruit crate that someone had left leaning against the wall and sat on it while I drank the juice. We would be leaving that night but had to go through our father's things first.

"Is that you, Annie?" A short woman, heavy around the middle, with hair the color of an old penny seemed to have appeared out of thin air. "Well, hell. Let me look at you. Still got your father's eyes. For God's sake, give me a damn hug." I stood up, willing to hug her even though I

had no idea who she was.

"You remember Rena, don't you?"

"Rena. Yes, of course I do," I said. There were no names in Ayer's Cliff that I was completely unfamiliar with. Rena Keegan's name stood out in my memory because our grandmother had always warned us to stay away from her dogs. *Those dogs have rabies sure as anything. Don't let me catch you anywhere near there.*

"Hell, I remember your grandmother hauling you girls all over town when you was babies. Lord what a handful. How *are* Gordon and Doris. We love and miss 'em. Look," she said as she pointed to what was my first home across the street. "Chez Susanne Patisserie. No Hartson's Grocery, what a shame. And look at you now, all grown and back home. Too bad it's in these circumstances though."

She didn't give me a chance to hug her because she grabbed me around the middle, pinning my elbows to my waist.

"They're fine, great really," I said.

"Just can't believe they're happy out west," she said as let go of me. "It's awful lonely in the city, isn't it?"

Rena's property was located directly behind Battry's store, across the alley from the Turners. Her house looked like a tool shed—a big one like you'd see on a farm—that had been converted into a house with parts added later. On one side, near the front, a shingled roof sloped, slightly, as though whoever built it couldn't decide on a flat or a sloping one, to shelter woodpiles. That roof was attached to the house halfway up and was supported by unsubstantial looking two-by-ones. Not far from it sat two huge doghouses, and behind them a sizable vegetable garden. Her lawn at the front of the property could hardly be recognized as such. The dogs, whose dark noses protruded from their doorways, were likely responsible for tearing up the sod.

"Now, I know you girls are in for your father's funeral, and I want you to know that the

reason I wasn't there yesterday wasn't 'cause I forgot or anything like that. You should know that I wasn't there 'cause I can't take funerals, they break me down, your father's especially would have, we started school together, you know."

"Did you?"

"Oh, sure we did, and me and a few others we looked after your father quite a bit. When he'd have them spells I'll be damned if he couldn't even git himself out of bed. I'd go up to the hotel and pound on the door. *Dick! Dick!* I'd say, *Open the damned door!* But that was awful dumb 'cause he couldn't git himself out of bed, not when he was real bad, so I'd git Robert to let me in, and there he'd be, shaky as hell, weak as hell, couldn't even git himself nothing to eat, couldn't even use a spoon or fork. Oh, sure, sometimes I'd even feed him myself, and sometimes I'd just sit there and tell him I had a good mind to stay put 'til he ate something. One day I says, *Dick, c'mon, tell me what you'd like to eat, how 'bout I make you some spring rolls?* One thing I am is a good cook, not as good as your grandmother, mind you, so I went ahead and made him some spring rolls thinking they'd be good 'cause he wouldn't have to use a spoon or fork, and he was pleased as hell. I left 'em in his room and came back, oh, about two days later and says, *Dick, how'd you like them spring rolls? Fine*, he says, *they were good*, he says, and then I notice there's a strong odor of cooked cabbage coming from somewhere in the room so I says *Dick, did you hide them spring rolls?* You know, he'd done that kind of thing before, sneaky stuff, and he says, *No, I ate them, they were good*, and so I follow my nose, I've got a great nose, over to the dresser and open up the second drawer and sure enough, there they are, a whole plate of spring rolls smelling to high heaven, so I says, *Dick, what the hell are you lying for?* and damned if he don't say, *I have no idea who put those there, I didn't.*

Now, here's the thing, a group of us in town didn't have no problem looking after your father when it was needed, Henry couldn't do it all by himself, and so the rest of us just took turns—except Ernest. After a few years Ernest couldn't take it anymore, bothered him too much. But by and large we stick by our people, no matter what."

I found myself looking down as I listened. Rena was wearing flat rubber sandals, and her toenails were painted copper. Her toes, feet and ankles were fat and purple. I wondered what it would be like to have to walk on painful feet. They looked painful.

I raised my head. "Then I guess I should thank you—"

"There'll be no thankin' goin' on, we look after each other that's all there is to it, but I was awful sad to find him in the condition I did the night he died, awful sad."

"Oh."

"It wasn't the liquor, I know that 'cause I got a good nose, a perfect nose, no, it wasn't the liquor that night. Wouldn't let anybody tell me or you or anybody any different. Oh sometimes it was the liquor when he'd come over to my house in the middle of the night, but *that* night it wasn't, I swear to hell, I was reading in bed late like I always do and I heard a noise at the side of the house, and so I got up and put on my housecoat. I wasn't afraid 'cause I knew if it was some stranger the dogs would've put up a racket like all hell was broke loose, they're my watch dogs, good as hell, and I see your father sittin' on top of the roof over the woodpile, didn't scare me none 'cause I was used to him goin' wanderin' around nights, and one time he was up there with my garden hose turned on sprayin' the doghouses, I says, *Dick! What the hell are you doin'?* That time he was all liquored up, and he says, *The fire. I'm putting out the fire*, and I says, *What the hell are you talkin' about? You're wastin' the hell out of my water*. The dogs loved it 'cause they were hotter than hell. Next day he didn't remember a thing, but the night he died he was there again, sittin' on top of the roof over the woodpile with his legs crossed Injun style, his glasses perched on one knee, and his hands coverin' his face. So I says, *Dick! What the hell are you doin?* When he takes his hands down I see he's cryin' like hell. Naturally I felt sorry for him, and I says, *What's the trouble Dick? What the hell you cryin' about in the middle of the night?* And he's feelin' foolish 'cause he's not liquored up, foolish as hell, and he wipes his face off, and puts his glasses back on and says, *I'm not crying Reeny*—that's what the boys call me, Reeny—*I'm looking at the pearls*, he says. At the time I didn't pay much attention to what he

was talkin' about. I was thinkin' more about gettin' him down from there and gettin' back to bed, I'm diabetic and can't go around losing sleep, but now that I think about it he must have been talkin' about my birds."

"Birds?"

"Big birds. I got two of 'em, males, peacocks. One's albino. I'm famous 'cause of him. Granby Zoo and two or three others keep tryin' to buy him off me."

"An *albino peacock*?"

"Oh sure. You want to see him?"

"Well, not now, maybe later. I have to go, Rena," I said. I started to move off even though I would not normally pass up an opportunity to see a fabulous creature. For some reason, unclear to me just then, I didn't think I could take such a sight. I abandoned my plan to go down to Angel's Falls and decided to go and get Grace out of bed.

Rena grabbed me just above the elbow. "After that," she said, "he just walked back towards the hotel and that was the last I ever seen of him. Now, we all know he got found down at the bridge and that's what makes me feel bad, but you gotta know it was nothing uncommon for your father to be wanderin' at night. Truth is we all wondered how he didn't end up that way sooner, except the uncommon thing that night was the whole no-liquor part of it."

"I have to go," I said as I backed away from her. "Really I do. We're flying out late tonight, and we've got to go through Dad's things, maybe catch a nap, visit with Henry and Denise a bit."

"You go right ahead. I know you're busy. Hell, there's never enough time in a day, especially when you've—"

"Take care, Rena," I broke in, afraid she might tell me something I didn't want to hear. I walked away but took only a few steps before I stopped and turned back, full around. "Rena," I said. "What's become of Charlie Battry?"

"Charlie? Oh hell, now Charlie's another—"

Just then her two dogs flew out of the doghouses, barking wildly in the manner they would if a stranger had violated their territory. In fact, a General Electric delivery truck had pulled up in front of the house.

"Oh *hell*," she shouted over her shoulder as she loped toward the house. "I gotta stop those dogs before they take somebody's throat out and I end up without my new dishwasher."

Our father's room was on the third floor at the back of the hotel. Its one window overlooked an old garage, the kind that holds six cars and has no doors. Right beside the window was a small balcony at the top of the fire escape that one could access only from the hallway, and on it one or two people could stand or sit, seeing as there were two high-backed wooden chairs there. A huge maple tree stood between the garage and the balcony, and on its trunk, about eight feet from the ground and partially obscured by leaves, hung a huge bulls-eye target.

His room was much smaller than the one we were staying in. It contained a single bed, a two-drawer dresser and an oak table with a reading lamp. A corkboard attached to the wall above the table displayed a few pictures. High school graduation ones of us, one of him as a teen in a hockey uniform, and an autographed one of Maurice Richard. The pictures, a few items of clothing strewn about, a small black-and-white TV, a refrigerator, and numerous ashtrays, were the only possessions in plain sight. If you didn't include the papers. They were stacked under the bed, against the walls, and in the closet. At first I thought they were entire newspapers, but on closer inspection I saw that these were sections only. Sports sections from numerous city papers, both American and Canadian.

"God," I said, as I opened the closet door, "look at all these papers." Grace was looking at the photographs.

"Hey," she said. "This is a personally autographed picture of Maurice Richard, not just a promo one. "It says, "*From one Richard to another*, and is signed, *#9 Maurice Richard*."

"*Toronto Globe and Mail, Montreal Gazette, Boston Globe, New York Times, Miami*

Herald. God. Where'd he get all these?" I asked.

"Royce, wasn't it?" Grace answered. She was not impressed with the papers. "Quite the fire hazard," she said.

"Of course. Yes, of course it was Royce," I said. I hadn't forgotten what he'd told us about bringing them, it was just that I'd imagined something quite different. I inspected the papers even more closely. "Can you believe it? They're stacked in order according to date. *Ten years* of them."

Ernest quietly knocked on the open door.

"Grace? Annie? You girls mind if I come in?"

Ernest Stanley and our father had been best friends from boyhood until the time I was born, when my parents separated. He and his three sons, all in their twenties, all dressed in very pressed black suits, starched white shirts, black ties, and shiny black shoes, had lined up, one behind the other, and shook our hands before they left the graveyard. Each one gave Grace and me his personal condolences. Ernest, last in line, took my hand and said, "Hey, Annie," and looked at me as though he knew exactly who I was, as though he'd known me my whole life. This stranger, his tone, his demeanor, his formally dressed sons—handsome like movie stars—made me feel, as I stood in the graveyard, an unfamiliar sadness.

He didn't enter until we smiled and waved him in. He touched the visor of his baseball cap and nodded to us, an old-fashioned gesture, I thought, for a man in his forties.

He motioned to the bed. "Mind if I sit here?" he said loudly.

Henry and Denise had left some empty boxes for us to pack up our father's things, empty the fridge. Grace had already pulled what looked like old legal papers from one of the desk drawers. She sat with them on her lap and slowly examined each one, as though any single item could merit serious concern. But I knew what she was really looking for. She was hoping to find something special for herself, a letter, a note, some personal communication. On the plane she'd said that because our father knew he was dying, he must have put something down for us. I

suppose she thought this plausible because, over the years, she had sent him many letters designed to invite him into her life. This was what she'd always longed for, our father in her life, our father recognizing her longing. He'd never answered a letter and this was something she'd come to terms with but only in part. I had no doubt, none whatsoever—it was a matter of strong intuition—that there would be nothing for either of us, not in writing anyway.

I opened the refrigerator and started pitching the things that no one could use. His diet consisted of what sick people eat. Applesauce, fortified protein drinks, and yogurt were all I found in the fridge.

Ernest looked uncomfortable sitting on the bed with his hands on his knees as Grace and I went about our tasks. I thought it was partly the discomfort of a man for whom remaining idle was unacceptable, and it was partly the emotional state he appeared be in. He acted like he was feeling claustrophobic, pulling at his flannel collar, shrugging his shoulders, wiping at this forehead as if he was sweating even though he wasn't.

"What do you think we should do with all these papers?" I asked this of no one in particular.

"I'll take care of them," Ernest said. He yelled when he spoke, as though he was used to talking to poor listeners, ones that would listen better when they realized he only said things once. "It'll be no problem."

"But what about carrying them out?" I asked. "Won't that take more than a few trips?"

"No worry. I'll start now and if I don't finish soon enough, I'll get the boys down." He stood up and selected the biggest box, filling it with papers from the closet first. Ernest worked quickly. He was strong and agile. "There," he said, as he lifted the box. "Helps to keep playing ball, never gave it up . . . I'll take these down and move my truck around to the side. Be right back."

After I'd coaxed Grace out of bed that day, she told me that Ernest, two of his three sons, and two hired hands ran the family business his father had started. He'd died the year before and

apparently Ernest took it hard. They owned a thousand acres of dairy farm and maple forest. *Ernest L. Stanley & Sons* was on the half-quart can of maple syrup on the table between the beds. Ernest's youngest son and Grace were out nearly all night, dancing at Angel's Falls.

Grace was slowly making her way through the documents. I was cleaning out the fridge, and Ernest hadn't yet returned, when we were startled by a deafening sound. A bang. It sounded like the one I thought I heard our first night in the hotel, except it was much louder. It seemed to come from right outside the window. Before we even got there to look, we heard a woman's voice, Katie's we assumed, and the sound of someone running down the hallway past our door. She opened the fire exit and we could hear her plain as day.

"Larry! Jesus! Have a little respect for these people and what they're doing here today!" she yelled.

Just then Ernest returned with the box he'd apparently emptied into his truck.

"What's all the commotion about?"

By this time Grace and I were at the window, sticking our heads out, and wondering if we should say anything to Larry.

He was sitting on one of the chairs at the top of the fire escape. The chair's high back was pressed against the building and its two back legs were the only ones in contact with the balcony. Larry was balancing in the chair with his feet positioned on the railing in front of him. He was wearing heavy, leather motorcycle boots, black ones, the kind with rounded toes and iron rings on the outside ankles. He was supporting a smoking rifle with his right hand, its butt pushed into his hip, its nose pointing up. He stared straight ahead at the target.

"Now, *this* is *weird*," Grace said.

"That's just Larry doing target practice. Wax bullets, tracers," Ernest said.

Grace and I still had our heads sticking out the narrow window, so when we turned to one another our noses nearly touched. And at exactly the same time we said, "*Wax bullets*" and started laughing. We must have been tired, because we both knew there wasn't anything funny

about wax bullets.

"Henry told me he's been at it all week, ever since your father sold him that gun—your grandfather's hunting rifle," Ernest said. He looked down at his hands just then, as though he wondered why they were purposeless, and proceeded to refill the box.

We heard a door slam—it must have been the fire exit—and then Katie, holding onto the door casing with one hand and leaning into the room said, "I was in the tavern when I heard. Anybody here have a heart attack?" Katie was flushed and out of breath, she'd run up three flights of stairs.

"We're fine," I said. "Why don't you sit down? Take a break."

"Larry," she said as she entered the room, "is a *jerk*. I told him to lay off the target practice today. Sorry." She sat hard on the bed and pushed a long wisp of hair away from her face with the back of her hand, one in which she clasped a wet bar cloth.

"Jerk!" she yelled, knowing he'd hear her if he was still there. "He didn't even pay your father for the gun. He *could* try," she said as she directed her rising voice to the open window, "getting a job!"

Grace dumped the first pile of documents into the garbage and rummaged through the other desk drawer, where she found a second pile as well as a stack of envelops bound together with brown twine. "Hey," she said in a hushed voice as she sat down and untied the knot, "these are my letters." She flipped through them, checking the postmarks. "In chronological order, too." And there she sat, just looking at them.

After a few moments she got up, and as she left with letters in hand, she said she was going back to our room.

"Annie," Ernest said. "This is a bigger job than I thought—I'll run up to the farm and bring more hands."

Again he touched the visor of his ball cap, nodded, and left.

"You've gotta love Ernest. He's always working," Katie said.

The room fell silent. Katie didn't speak and neither did I. We both looked around, trying to figure out what to say—at least I was.

"But if he gets a job," Katie said finally, as she placed the rag on the floor and drew a cigarette from a pack that was in the large front-pocket of her black apron, "he won't be able to help with Rosa." She lit the cigarette and took a long drag as she looked me up and down, just once. "You're smart," she said, smoke escaping through her mouth and nostrils, "not to have kids. Look at me. I'm stuck. If it wasn't for Rosa—well, let's just say my life would be completely different. For the better."

I remained standing. "Rosa seems like a great kid."

"You don't know the half of it. She's stubborn like I was. Larry's the only one who can make her mind and sometimes not even he's good at it. " She took a quick drag off her cigarette and expelled the smoke through rounded lips, producing two smoke rings. Watching the rings floating away from her made her look cross-eyed. "He used to make *me* mind and I figure I turned out all right."

In that moment I wished that Ernest and his sons would arrive and save me from this time alone with Katie.

"Do you really think Rosa's okay with Larry? Isn't he awful . . . harsh?"

"Yah. But she's gotta learn independence. He made *me* independent. I used to go to the bathroom outside and wipe my butt with leaves just to show him that if I didn't need toilet paper, I sure as shit didn't need him." She smiled as though she was pleased with this memory. "And Rosa's gotta be tougher than I was because she's got no name. Everybody in town knows she's got no father. Larry's the closest thing. I couldn't tell you her father's name for a million bucks. What's bad about working at The Cliff House is that lonely nights make for cowboy nights, then what happens is you end up making a mistake. A big mistake. "Know what I mean?" She gave me a sideways glance and then squashed her cigarette into one of our father's many overflowing ashtrays. "No. Don't suppose you do," she said.

"What about the rest of your family?" I asked. "Won't they help?"

"All dead. Danny died of throat cancer. Wish it had been Larry instead. And Mom and Dad are gone too."

I was tired and didn't know if it was because of the conversation or the circumstances or both that my head suddenly felt light, like I needed to put it down. Maybe everything had just caught up with me. I sat on the bed beside Katie and rested my forehead on my knees.

"Do you think my father had throat cancer?" I asked.

"Nah," she said. "I think it was getting him in the chest. I could hear him coughing at night, more than someone with a regular smokers' cough—and sometimes when I cleaned in the bathroom up here I noticed where he'd spit blood in the sink."

I didn't raise my head at first when I asked, "Did you see him before he went down to the bridge?"

Katie said nothing for a time. She stood up and walked over to the window and looked out. It was still open. "Larry's gone," she said without expression. Then she folded her arms across her stomach and pressed one shoulder into the window casing. She was quiet again, staring out the window.

"I was in the alley by the side door," she began. "Taking out some garbage bags, when I saw your father coming back from Rena's. I'd heard her yelling at him so I knew he was there. He didn't notice me when he went in the front door like he always did when he was with it—your father took in everything when he was with it—so I went inside and headed him off at the foot of the stairs. He was upset. He'd been crying. But he was with it, I could tell. All he said was that he was going to change his clothes and take a bike ride. And then he said some things that made me think he was up to some different kind of thinking. *If the girls come*, he said, *tell them there's something for them at Norrie's'. And tell Larry the gun's all his.*"

Katie turned from the window and looked at me. "I'm sorry," she said as she bit hard on her thumbnail. "If I'd known that he was never coming back—" She covered her face with her

hands and started crying.

I got up and went over to her, not sure what to do. "It's not your fault—"

"It's not just him," she said as her hands dropped from her face, like weights.

Her expression was not one of sadness but of exasperation.

"It's Charlie too."

"Charlie Battry died too?"

"Stupid Phil lost the store. They just moved. The day before yesterday."

Katie wiped her tears away with the palms of her hands as though no amount of it could get them off. "Charlie's never coming back."

I put my hand on her shoulder and said, "You'll be all right . . . you'll see."

"You don't understand," she said as she broke down sobbing. She arched her neck back and looked at the gray ceiling as if there was someone there. "He was *mine*," she said, hitting herself on the chest with a closed fist. I withdrew my hand and stepped back, stunned by the sound. Then, a little calmer, she looked at me with hard, red eyes. "The only one," she said. "The *only* one."

If you turn right instead of left at the gazebo you're still on Main Street, a part of it that sits in complete darkness after sunset. If you go past Wood's Snack Bar and Norrie's Garage on the left, you'll find, farther down, Doctor and Mrs. Brown's house—the first and last house on that end of Main Street. It was built by Dr. Brown's grandfather, a man who moved to this area from the southern states. It is a smaller version of the kind of mansion you would see on a plantation. Entirely whitewashed, the three-storey house is the tallest in town, and has front columns that reach as high as the second storey. Above the columns, a balcony wraps around the house on three sides.

A short ways beyond the house the road dips down and makes a hairpin turn before it straightens out and runs across the bridge and past the dance hall at Angel's Falls. There are no

falls there, just Tomifobia River, more a creek than a river, which flows out of the woods, under the bridge, and through a marsh area that stretches about eight miles, almost as far as the border, before entering a woods again. In the evening and at night—depending on the moonlight—and on some mornings, you can see, above the cattails and tall grasses, marsh gas hovering in long wispy strands, like a drop of milk in water, gray or bluish-gray.

After Katie and I spoke in our father's room, I made my way down to the bridge. I couldn't imagine what he might have left for Grace and me at Norrie's. But I believed that he left something and knew it was just like him to concoct a plan like that. Before I got to the Browns' house I could see that someone was sitting on the balcony in a rocking chair. It was Nurse Brown, Dr. Brown's' wife. When we were kids we loved her because after the doctor did horrible things to us—like give us needles for vaccinations—she would feed us home baked cookies and candies. She saw me walking along and waved as I was about to pass.

"Is that you, Annie?" She grasped the railing and rose out of her chair with some difficulty. "I know because you look just like your father, always have. And Grace looks just like your mother—that's why I've never mixed you up. Wait right there I'm coming down. There's something I want to tell you."

I expected a much taller and larger woman than the one who eventually emerged from the front door. The last time I saw her was when I was seven, when my grandmother and I went about my dog bite, and at that time I'd not realized she was such a small woman.

She walked slowly, with a cane, and I could see that in fifteen years she'd gone elderly. She was tiny and bent over, not drastically, but enough so that when she looked up into my face she had to summon up energy. She was wearing a dark green-and-gold-plaid dress with buttons all down the front. Her shoes were what Grace and I always used to call old-lady shoes. Those black or brown leather ones with pinholes on the tops and sides. Sometimes the pinholes form a design. She was one of those rare very-old women who wore long hair, past the shoulders.

She grabbed my hand—not the way you'd take someone's hand for a regular handshake,

but the way lots of elderly people do, the way that makes your hand go into an awkward fist—and kept shaking it as we talked.

She smiled broadly. "How are Gordon and Doris? We miss them so much. Hartson's Grocery, too."

"Good, good," I said. "They're good."

"We are too. We are too," she said as she went on shaking.

She told me she didn't have much time because she'd put the kettle on and it wouldn't be long before it was boiling. She was making tea and Glen needed his tea. He was good but he couldn't walk very well and was starting to forget things. She said she never left him alone if she could help it.

"I want to tell you what happened here last week," she said, "regarding your father."

I felt I knew this old woman. Not just because I remembered her from years ago but also because she seemed like someone who always had been and always would be there. Like a good witch, right up there, rocking on that balcony for eternity.

"But before I do," she said as she tightened her grip on the cane and shuffled her feet a little, "there's something I want you to know. I'll be breaking a promise I made to your uncle. But promising wasn't right. An accident's one thing but something else is another." She tilted her head to one side before she continued. "Annie, what I'm going to tell you is a simple, simple story. It's one about the most simple things, about comings and goings. When they happened in homes." She leaned on her cane and lowered her head. "I was there when your grandmothers were born. I saw them when they come. I was there when one of them died, too young. I saw her when she was going. I was there when your grandfathers were born. I saw them when they come. I was there when one of them died. I saw him when he was going. I was there when your mother was born. I saw her when she come. I was there when your father was born. I saw him when he come. I was there when he died." She raised her head. "And I saw him when he was going."

"When he was *going?"* Up to that moment I'd been thinking in terms of alive one minute

and dead the next. *A single impact.*

She squeezed my fist even tighter.

"Annie remember. This is a simple story. Can you say *simple* for me?"

"Simple," I said. I wasn't able to stop the tears.

"All right," she said as she shook my hand some more.

"I was up on the balcony late, late at night when I saw your father get off his bike at Norrie's and lean it against one of those two gas pumps. He was in dark clothes so thank goodness for the moon. We've got no streetlights down here, so thank goodness for the moon. It was as bright as a mint nickel. I didn't think much about what he was doing. I went into the house to check the kettle, and when I went back out on the balcony I saw what I thought at first was an animal near the guardrail at this end of the bridge. Before long I realized that what I was looking at was no animal. It was your father crouching down."

She shook my hand hard.

"A car approached no more than a minute after I knew it was him. He watched and waited until just the right time—he never looked away—and then he dove head first onto the road. The car swerved and then kept right on. I went to the door and hollered to Glen to call for an ambulance quick, and to call Henry. I grabbed my cane and went out, half-thinking there was a chance he wasn't hurt. But when I got down on my knees I saw he was, and in a matter of a few seconds he started going. I know it when I see it. They change, the eyes. I see innocence itself in that change, every time. Every time. But what you don't see is what they see—you think it's got to be nothing at all, they seem blind, the eyes."

She let go of my hand and placed hers on my cheek.

"Annie, your father was going fast when he said, *Grace? Grace? Is that you?* and I said, *Yes it's me, Dad. I'm here. Can you see me?* and he said, *Yes. I can see you*. And he died."

There was no need to go as far as the bridge. After I left Mrs. Brown I started back,

almost forgetting what Katie had told me about Norrie's. I crossed the street and approached the abandoned station. It seemed to me that Norrie's had never been in business because it was already out-of-use when Grace and I were kids. The old pumps, the kind that are circular on top, reminded me of astronauts in space suits just as they had years before. I wondered what our father had left, and at first I found nothing. I knew that Henry would have taken the bike. And since all the windows in the station were boarded up and the big doors padlocked, it wasn't reasonable to think our father would have put something inside. I gave up and started back, but then I thought it best to check again.

There were many cracks, some of them wide, in the concrete that formed a base for the pumps. The glasses weren't easy to find because they were in one of those cracks. As I stood there holding them, I thought about Grace, all alone with those unanswered letters from a man she believed had died peacefully, in his bed.

I barely slowed down when I dropped them in a trashcan on my way back to the hotel.

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